

i can't take you anywhere

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by [dimolto](#)

Summary

“One more word and I’m going to drive us both off a cliff,” Hinata deadpanned.
“Well, I would probably survive it. Ultimate Lucky Student and all.” Komaeda tilted his head. “But if you really do want to kill me, I’m sure we can find a way to make it happen!”

On the way back from the third-year class trip to Hokkaido, the bus happened to leave two students behind: a tag-along Reserve Course boy who, as always, wasn’t quite sure how he kept getting himself into these situations, and an enigmatic young man who was beginning to feel very, very cheated by his luck.

Now, if Hajime Hinata wants to get back to Tokyo, he’s going to have to face a hotwired car, 900 miles of open road, and ten days stuck with Nagito Komaeda.

prologue

Chapter Notes

or: the gang misses the boat.

One of these days, Hajime Hinata was going to have to get used to the fact that nothing in his life ever went according to plan.

He'd been told on several occasions that he was too pessimistic, and while he was willing to admit that it was true, he still tried to look on the bright side every once in a while. But as he stared blankly at the empty road in front of him, Hinata was beginning to think that even that small bit of optimism had been a huge mistake.

"Hey, Komaeda," he said, resignation dulling his voice.

The boy standing at his side turned to look at him curiously, wide-eyed and almost droll.
"Yes, Hinata?"

"Where the fuck is the bus?"

It all started two weeks ago when Nanami had practically insisted Hinata join Class 77-B on their third-year summer class trip to Hokkaido. Hinata had tried to decline; he was a Reserve Course student, after all, and he didn't want to overstep. He knew it wasn't his place to go along with the Ultimates, despite the staggering number of them that he'd somehow befriended. But once Nanami gotten everyone else onboard, Hinata couldn't resist for much longer - one week later and he was on a boat headed north with the rest of the class.

They'd spent a week in Hokkaido, and it was some of the most fun Hinata'd had in his life. Today was the last day of the trip, and the class had gone on one final hike through the forest before boarding the bus to the docks. The hike had been referred to as 'a manly test of courage' (Nidai), 'our perilous odyssey through the fires of pandemonium' (Tanaka), and 'yay, an opportunity to ditch Soda in the woods!' (Saionji). Whatever it was, it was apparently too dangerous to go off alone, so each person in the class had been randomly partnered up with someone else.

Hinata had, of course, had gotten paired with Nagito Komaeda.

He wasn't nearly naive enough to think he could get along with everybody, but that didn't stop his frustration at the state of things between him and Komaeda. Hinata's friendships with so many of the Ultimates meant he was practically a constant fixture in Komaeda's life,

which was clearly something neither of them knew how to handle. It had been nearly two years since they'd met, and they were still constantly at odds.

It was obvious that Komaeda didn't exactly have a high opinion of the 'Reserve Course freeloader,' but he also hadn't tried to kill Hinata yet, which Hinata thought was probably something constructive. Theirs was a strange relationship; constantly challenging each other, disagreeing over nothing at all, and playing games with their words that only the two of them could comprehend.

The odd thing about Komaeda, though, was that he understood how Hinata worked better than anyone else. Komaeda knew exactly how to get under his skin, and he was so good at it that it almost felt like an Ultimate talent all on its own. Seriously, it was like he had a million pre-prepared insults about the Reserve Course ready to fire off at any given time. To be completely honest, Hinata often felt the same way about himself, but that didn't mean someone *else* had to say it.

And, okay, maybe Komaeda wasn't the *only* problem here. Hinata had considered that he could probably be a bit nicer, but, well, sue him. He tried his best to be an empathetic person, he really did, but he'd reached his tipping point; if Komaeda was going to try to drive him up the wall at every turn, he was going to do the exact same thing.

The point was, they weren't friends. They didn't like each other, and they didn't get along, and that was probably why they'd ended up lost in the woods. As much as Hinata wanted to blame Komaeda's luck, he knew that it never would have happened if he'd actually been paying attention to where they were going instead of bickering with Komaeda. *After all, wasn't Hinata supposed to be the one who actually had his shit together here?*

Eventually, though, they'd stumbled onto a path out of the forest and found their way back to the bus - at least, the place where the bus was *meant* to be.

This is when we return to the beginning: Two boys and an empty road, waiting for a bus that would never come.

It was just before sundown, the cicadas were chirping, and Hajime Hinata was halfway to losing his shit. "...It's gone," he murmured despondently. "The bus is really, actually gone."

"Are you *sure* you belong in the Reserve Course?" asked Komaeda, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "I would have thought that only the Ultimate Analyst could notice a minute detail like that."

Hinata just glared at him. "No, this- this can't be right. They wouldn't have just left us behind." He frantically pulled his phone out of his back pocket. "I'll just call someone to come get us, and- oh." Staring at his phone screen, he saw that he had missed calls and unopened texts from practically every member of his class, including an astounding seventeen attempts from one Kazuichi Soda.

Komaeda was also looking at his own phone, which Hinata noticed only had one lonesome missed call from Nanami. "...It appears there wasn't any service in the forest," remarked

Komaeda grimly.

Hinata narrowed his eyes. “*Now* who’s stating the obvious?”

Komaeda scrunched up his nose, looking affronted. “Sometimes I feel the need to clarify,” he said disdainfully. “I just wasn’t sure if you were too stupid to get it on your own.”

With a groan, Hinata looked back down at his phone and tapped on one of the missed calls. As he waited for the other line to pick up, he put his phone up to his ear, letting out a small sigh on relief when his call was answered. “Soda, buddy!” he said. It sounded much more threatening than a casual greeting had any right to. “Where’s the bus?”

“Uh, okay, so, here’s the thing.” Soda’s voice on the other line was very, very nervous. “You guys kind of. May have. Missed it?”

“You *left without us?*” Hinata demanded, feeling his stomach begin to twist itself in knots.

“We didn’t want to, man, but we had a boat to catch! We asked the bus driver to wait, but he was all like, ‘*No, I have a tight-ass schedule to follow! No, I won’t wait for your soul bro! No, you can’t put military-grade drones in the cargo hold!*’ What an asshole, right?”

“Soda,” he warned. “How the fuck are we supposed to get back to Hope’s Peak?”

“Uh.” Soda paused. “Road trip?”

“...I’m going to hang up now,” Hinata said, and did just that despite Soda’s loud protests.

As Hinata shoved his phone in his pocket, Komaeda’s eyes flicked towards him. “...They’re gone for good, aren’t they?”

“...Yeah.” Hinata glanced back at Komaeda, morbid amusement taking over his internal panic. “Y’know, for someone called the Ultimate Lucky Student, you sure don’t seem very lucky right now.”

Komaeda just laughed hysterically. “Perhaps the bad luck of getting stuck here with you will lead to some extraordinary good luck in the future!”

Hinata let out a deep breath. “Komaeda,” he said evenly, “we’re going to be stuck together for a while, so you have to promise me that things aren’t going to get weird.”

Komaeda gave him a small, complacent smile. “I think we both know I can’t promise that, Hinata.”

Well, thought some stupid, traitorous part of Hinata’s brain:

At least this won’t be boring.

day 1

Chapter Summary

Misdemeanor crime, fast food, incredibly awkward bed-sharing - and unfortunately for Hinata, it's only the first day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So what, is your plan to *walk* all the way to Tokyo?”

Hinata continued trudging along the side of the country road, watching the trees as he went. He didn't even bother to look back at Komaeda, who had apparently made it his job to call out snarky comments while reluctantly trailing behind him.

“We’re only walking to the closest town,” Hinata said. (He was *pretty sure they were headed in the right direction. 80%, at least. It was hard to tell when everything around him just looked like forest.*) “We’ll book a hotel for the night there, then start back home first thing in the morning.”

“Mhm. And how are we planning to *get* back home?”

“Uh.” Hinata paused, feeling incredibly stupid for not considering *that* part. “...Call a taxi?”

“What taxi is willing to drive two teenagers for 900 miles?” Komaeda shot back. “Think again, Reserve Course.”

Hinata scowled. “Well, we could just take the taxi to the nearest airport, right? There’s gotta be one around here somewhere.”

“No,” Komaeda said quickly, an odd, frantic edge to his voice. “Not- not planes. Please.”

Hinata glanced over his shoulder, confused. Komaeda was looking at the ground with a strange, scared intensity, and his face was even paler than usual, so Hinata just sighed and kept walking. Maybe the guy was afraid of heights, or something. “...Then I guess we could try to find the nearest train station?” he attempted. “It would be longer than flying, but still only a few days.”

“Ah, well,” Komaeda interjected, thankfully back to his normal, only *slightly* off-putting tone of voice. “I’ve sort of been banned from the railway network.”

“The whole thing?” Hinata asked, dumbfounded. “Like, all of the trains?”

“That is what railway network implies, yes.” Komaeda said slowly, as if it was extraordinarily obvious and somehow Hinata was the weird one for not immediately getting it.

“No trains. Got it.” Hinata racked his brain for another option. “...Does your ban include buses?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

Hinata pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. At this rate, they were going to be trapped in Hokkaido forever, just the two of them. They would live there, and they would die there, and they would get awful matching tombstones there. Hinata couldn’t imagine anything worse. “If all my ideas are so terrible, then why don’t *you* come up with something?” he huffed.

“We could always drive!” Komaeda chimed.

“What, do *you* see any car rental places around here?” Hinata replied, pained.

“No,” said Komaeda, “but I do see *that*. ”

He stopped in place and pointed across the road. Hinata's eyes followed the gesture to see an ancient-looking car pulled over off the opposite shoulder, just next to the tree line and slightly obscured by the shade. It was bright green, horribly ugly, and the word ‘free :)’ had been etched into the thick layer of dust coating the rear windshield.

Hinata narrowed his eyes, first at the car, then at Komaeda. “...That seems suspiciously convenient.”

“Things usually do,” replied Komaeda, seemingly unconcerned. “You’re pretty skeptical, Hinata. There’s no need to be so pessimistic!”

Hinata took a deep breath, bracing himself. “Okay. Say we even trust this car - which, by the way, is already a stretch. How the hell would we start driving it?”

Komaeda huffed out a clearly exaggerated sigh. “Leave it to the Reserve Course student to have such a limited way of thinking. Obviously we need to break in!”

Hinata scoffed at him. “Yeah, and I’m *sure* you already know how to break into a car.”

“I can try!”

“You’re kidding.”

In a wordless response, Komaeda produced a multi-tool from his backpack and held it up for Hinata to see.

“...Right. Of course you’re not.”

"This is truly an incredible sign of hope!" Komaeda looked both ways before skipping across the road, multi-tool in hand, towards the car. "How lucky for us!"

Hinata followed awkwardly behind him, still vehemently opposed to whatever the fuck Komaeda was about to do. He watched, scowling, as Komaeda messed around near the driver's side door. But after a few minutes, Hinata felt his jaw drop as a loud popping sound came from the car lock. Komaeda pulled the door open with ease and jumped into the car before climbing into the passenger seat, which Hinata gathered was Komaeda's way of telling him *he* was driving.

Hinata stood back for a moment. He didn't want to follow Komaeda into that car, he *really* didn't - but he had to get home somehow, and this was beginning to seem like his only option. His sad, pathetic little option. Gritting his teeth, he went around to the driver's side and slid into the seat, closing the door maybe a bit harder than he needed to.

"How did you even do that?" he muttered as he buckled his seatbelt.

Komaeda hummed from the passenger seat, spinning his multi-tool in his hand. "Even my worthless talent is good for something every once in a while!"

His talent clearly wasn't worthless if it could help us with something like this, Hinata thought, a twinge of jealousy creeping into his mind. But it would be entirely useless to try to convince Komaeda of that, so he didn't even try. He adjusted the seat a bit and sat up straight, ready to drive, before he realized one thing. "Hey, Komaeda," he said weakly, "do you know how to hotwire a car?"

The other boy paused, looking at the ceiling. "Well, I could connect some wires and see what happens!"

"Absolutely *not*." Hinata had to shut him down immediately - the break-in had already been pushing it, and he wasn't exactly eager to see what kind of chaos Komaeda could start with a worryingly unstable car.

Komaeda turned back towards him and raised his eyebrows. "Like you have a better solution?"

"It would be pretty hard to think of a worse one. We're gonna do mine first." Hinata pulled out his phone and flipped it open, scrolling through his contacts until he found the right number. He held it to his ear, waited a few rings, and then: "Hey again, Soda," he greeted weakly.

"Hinata! I missed you, dude!" Soda's voice crackled to life on the other line, far too energetic for Hinata's current mood.

"...It's been twenty minutes since we talked."

"What, is one soul bro not allowed to miss another soul bro? Manly bonding exceeds the limits of time, y'know!"

“Yeah, whatever, miss you too, man.” Hinata rolled his eyes, slightly amused, then asked, “Are you guys still on the bus?”

“For now, but we’re about ten minutes out from the docks.”

“Great, so you have time to help me.” Hinata seized his opportunity. “Komaeda and I found a free car on the side of the road, and we’re gonna hotwire it.”

“Oh, cool!” Soda paused, apparently processing Hinata’s words. “Wait, *what?*”

Hinata pressed on. “And you’re good with cars, yeah?”

“Well, obviously! I’m the Ultimate Mechanic for a reason, but that doesn’t mean I can just magically do something like *that!*” He groaned. “I was kidding about the whole road trip thing, ya know. You couldn’t just do the normal thing and just get a flight back?”

Hinata shook his head. “Komaeda doesn’t like planes.”

“Okay, but what about you? You coulda gone on your own, right?”

Hinata paused. The thought had never even crossed his mind, and he didn’t quite like the uneasy feeling it gave him. If he left Komaeda alone out here, he would probably just worry even more. *After all, who knew what kind of trouble Komaeda would get into on his own?* “Leaving him is... an impossibility,” he decided.

“Hinata, you’re my bro and everything,” said Soda, “but there’s seriously something wrong with you.”

Big talk coming from a guy like you, Hinata thought crossly - but before he could say it, he was interrupted by a deep, gravelly voice from the background of the other line.

“Are you communing with the mortal Hinata?” From the way the question was phrased, it could only have been Tanaka.

Soda’s voice got a bit muffled as he turned away from the phone. “Yeah, dude, I’m trying to help him hotwire a car.”

“You’re trying to help him *what?*” Hinata recognized Koizumi’s chiding voice even over the phone.

“Here, I’ll put him on speaker!” Soda said cheerfully.

“No, don’t-” But Hinata’s protests were too late as he was greeted a chorus of voices from the other line. “Hi, guys.”

“That’s illegal, Hinata,” chastised Koizumi.

“Do you even have a license?” demanded Kuzuryu.

“Does the car have a radio?” asked Ibuki excitedly.

"I know it's illegal, but I don't exactly have any other options right now. Yes, I have a license, I got it just after my 18th birthday. And yes, the car has a radio, but it probably hasn't been touched since the eighties." Hinata dragged a hand over his face and tried to ignore Komaeda's muffled laughter from the passenger seat. "Listen, Soda, can you please just help me?"

"Uh... here's the thing. If ya needed to disassemble the engine and rebuild the whole thing from scratch, I'd have no problem leading you through it! I could help you fix an old car, or make a new car, or fuse two cars together - hey, there's an idea!" Soda had started using his batshit-inventor voice, the one he used when he got way too into talking about his talent. "A robot made of cars! If you find a second car, I could help you make some kind of giant bio-machine car mecha!"

Hinata thumped his head back against the car seat headrest. "Yeah, of course, buddy, just let me find another car in the middle of the fucking wilderness, super easy, no problem here, *oh wait*, no, never mind, you're just insane."

Soda sighed loudly. "Okay, okay, I get it. What I mean to say is, this kind of criminal activity isn't exactly my area of expertise, y'know?"

"If you can't even hotwire a car, then why do you look like such a nasty delinquent?" called a mocking voice that must have been Saionji.

"Hey!" Soda cried in offense, then turned back towards the phone. "Listen, dude, this isn't how I work. You know that. I have to get into an engine with my bare hands - push in real deep, y'know?"

"*Ew*," said Saionji.

"Kinky!" called Ibuki.

"Come on, I didn't mean it like *that*," Soda grumbled, embarrassed. "It's not weird, okay? I just mean that if I was there with you, I could work with the machine and figure it out, but as it is, I don't-"

"Pardon me, but I believe I could be of assistance here!" Sonia's unmistakably confident voice rang out over the phone.

"W-what?" Soda had clearly not been expecting a solution like this. "Miss Sonia...?"

"Sonia, are you serious?" Hinata asked, incredulous.

"Children as young as eight know how hotwire cars in Novoselic, Hinata," Sonia declared proudly.

Not for the first time, Hinata wondered what the *hell* was going on in Sonia's home country. "Why would they even need to know something like that?"

"The motto of our kingdom is to always be prepared!"

Hinata pinched the bridge of his nose. "...Soda, please give the phone to Sonia." He heard the sound of shuffling on the other line. "Okay, I'm putting you on speaker." He then turned to Komaeda. "Sonia's going to guide us through hotwiring this thing. Go ahead, Sonia."

"This is a complicated and dangerous undertaking for someone untrained in the process, so I must ask you to be careful!" Sonia called from the other line. "The most convenient way to do this would be with a multi-tool, but it would be a miracle to find one of those lying around, so-"

"It's a miracle, then," Hinata deadpanned, his eyes flicking towards Komaeda. "Hand me the tool," he muttered.

"You really think I would put my life in the hands of a someone who doesn't even have a talent?" Komaeda hissed.

Hinata glared back at him, refusing to back down. "You think I would put *my* life in the hands of the guy who won 'Most Likely to Accidentally Cause an Explosion?'"

Komaeda huffed. "I can't believe Saionji actually came up with an award for that."

"I can't believe she made you a trophy."

Komaeda narrowed his eyes. "I'm not giving you my multi-tool," he muttered.

"Do you want to get out of here or not?" Hinata half-demanded, half-whispered.

"Ah, Hinata? Komaeda? Are you still there?" Sonia's voice echoed from the phone.

"Still here, Sonia," Hinata said.

"And you... have a multi-tool?"

"I do." Hinata shot a pointed glance at Komaeda. "Right, Komaeda?"

Komaeda scowled at him, picking up on Hinata's gambit immediately. Now forced to choose between letting Hinata win, just this once, and starting a petty fight in front of one of his beloved Ultimates, there was no way he was going to cause trouble for Sonia.

"Of *course*, Hinata." Komaeda's voice was exaggeratedly sweet, to the point where only Hinata could have understood just how biting it was meant to be. He dropped the tool into Hinata's outstretched hand, glowering.

"Let's begin!" started Sonia, oblivious. "First, remove the plastic cover on the steering column. You will find three bundles of wires, and you are to select the one leading straight up. This holds the battery, ignition, and starter wire." Her voice was excited and direct all at once.

Hinata began to follow her instructions, pulling out the wires matching Sonia's description. "Uh, got it."

"The battery wires will be the red ones," she explained. "You want to strip about two centimeters of insulation from these and twist them together."

Once again, Hinata did what he was told. He could practically feel Komaeda's intense gaze on him as he worked, but he refused to give him the satisfaction of looking back. "Done."

"Excellent work, Hinata!" Sonia said enthusiastically. "Now, you're going to find the brown ignition wire. Connect that to the battery wire."

Hinata did, and the car started up. "It worked!"

"Hella boss! Now, to drive the car, you'll need to spark the starter wire, which can get dangerous. You'll have to take extreme caution here, Hinata."

Hinata swallowed uncomfortably. "...Okay."

"Strip the starter wire one centimeter down. This is a live wire, so don't do anything rash!" Sonia warned.

Hinata was beginning to feel very nervous; he was surprised he'd even gotten this far, and his hands were beginning to shake as he picked up the wire. He tried to hold it steady, but the shaking only got worse.

"Hey," Komaeda muttered, so quietly that Sonia couldn't hear. He was staring at Hinata's hands, and there was an odd, unplaceable expression on his face that Hinata had never seen before. "I know you don't trust me, and I know my talent isn't worth much at all, but I think... I think I could be useful here. Lucky, remember?"

Hinata hesitated. He was unsure of his own ability to complete the task, but he also didn't know if he should trust Komaeda with a live wire - but, when he looked at him, he didn't see a trace of an ulterior motive in the boy's expression. With a sigh, he offered the wires to Komaeda. "If you're sure."

"This kind of thing is what I was meant to do. Something like this will either go really right or *really* wrong, but don't worry. It usually goes right." He took the wires into one hand, and accepted the multi-tool in the other. "...Besides, if one of us has to be made expendable here, we both know it's me." And just for a moment, his voice was so resigned and flat that it caught Hinata off guard. He looked at him, carefully trying to figure out a way to respond - but before he could, Komaeda had already begun stripping the wire, deft fingers working quickly. Hinata thought it would be best not to bother him when he was busy with that. After all, luck could only take you so far.

Once Komaeda finished his task, he turned back to the phone. "Ah, what's next, Sonia?"

"Touch the end of the starter wire to the connected battery wires. Then rev the engine, and once it starts, you may detach the starter wire and continue on your way!"

"...Be careful, Komaeda," Hinata said quietly.

Komaeda gaze flicked towards him, eyes wide, as if he was surprised that Hinata would even give an ounce of consideration for his well-being. But then he shook his head, touched the wires together, and with a loud sound, Hinata revved the engine.

“Perfect!” Sonia said, and Hinata let out a shaky sigh of relief. “Now you need to break the steering lock. Pop off the metal keyhole, which will release a spring and break the lock.”

Komaeda followed the instructions, and when Hinata tilted the wheel, it followed his movements.

“Yeah!” he exclaimed, ecstatic that something had actually gone right for the first time that day. “Thank you, Sonia,” he said gratefully.

Komaeda nodded eagerly. “Sonia, your talent is amazing, as always! I’m overjoyed to even be in the presence of something so hopeful!”

“It’s my pleasure to help out my classmates!” she replied, her voice full of cheer. “I’m glad we could achieve such an 'epic win' together!”

“Hey, we’ve reached the docks, so we gotta head out,” Soda interrupted.

Hinata nodded. “See you soon, I hope.”

“You know it. And Hinata?”

“Yeah?”

“A car robot *would* be cool, right?”

He sighed fondly. “...Yeah, Soda. That would be awesome.”

“I knew it!” Soda whooped. “Good luck on your road trip!” And with that, he hung up the phone.

Back in the old, dirty car, two boys sat in silence for a moment before looking at each other deliriously.

“...Holy shit, we did it.” Hinata broke into a grin. “We did it!”

“We actually did it!” Komaeda repeated, smiling widely back at him.

Hinata offered out his hand for a high five, and it seemed to take Komaeda a moment to fully understand the gesture. But instead of doing the normal thing, Komaeda just sort of reached up and held onto his hand, because he apparently refused to follow even the most basic societal conventions. Their hands were practically the same size, Hinata noticed, but where his was calloused and tan, Komaeda’s was smooth and pale. Komaeda’s whole hand was covered in small scars that Hinata could only presume were from a variety of unfortunate luck-related incidents, and his fingers were cold, and he was *still holding Hinata’s hand*.

“Dude,” Hinata said, “let go.” He’d been going for condescending, but the slight embarrassed strain to his voice gave him away. Cursing himself inwardly, he jerked his own hand back just to prove a point.

Komaeda’s hand hung awkwardly in the air for a moment, hesitant, before he slowly pulled back and returned the hand to his lap. “Ah. We should probably start driving now, Hinata.”

Hinata stiffly nodded in agreement as he quickly pulled off the side of the road and got into his lane. To his shock, the car somehow had a full tank of gas, which meant he wouldn’t have to stop for a while. It took a bit to get used to the car’s controls, but by the time they were a few miles in, he was cruising down the road with ease. (He was still half-expecting with car to break down in the middle of the nowhere, though.) Hinata had always liked driving; it was something he was good at, something he knew he had control over. The road was smooth beneath the car, and Hinata watched as the tall trees on the side of the road blurred green and dark gold in the last minutes of daylight. The forest floor was covered in wildflowers, painting their bright hues all along the edge of the highway.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Komaeda in the passenger seat. He was sitting with his knees folded into his chest, fingers drumming against his leg as he stared at the scenery outside.

“It’ll take about 20 hours to get back to Tokyo,” Hinata said, causing Komaeda to turn towards him. “So if we can get to Asahikawa tonight, and we each drive for five hours a day, we should be able to make it back home in the next two days.”

“Ah, Hinata.” Komaeda looked slightly embarrassed. “I believe you’ve made a slight miscalculation there.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t have a driver’s license.”

Hinata sighed, pained. “...I don’t know if I can drive more than five hours a day, so I guess we’ll have to take four days. That’s fine. We can do it,” he said, more to reassure himself than Komaeda.

“Are you sure?” Komaeda asked, his voice suddenly haughty. “I don’t know if I can trust a lowly Reserve Course student to take me that far.”

“One more word and I’m going to drive us both off a cliff,” Hinata shot back, deadpan.

“Well, I would probably survive it. Ultimate Lucky Student and all.” Komaeda tilted his head. “But if you really do want to kill me, I’m sure we can find a way to make it happen!”

Hinata grimaced. “Don’t talk about something so morbid so casually!”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” replied Komaeda, a bit defensive.

Hinata squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white before taking a slow, deep breath. “Listen. We’re going to be stuck together for a while, and I know that our track record

isn't exactly stellar, but I'd really like it if we could try to get along on this trip. We just need to pretend to like each other for a few days. It'll make this thing a lot easier for both of us."

"Whatever Hinata wants," replied Komaeda placidly. It was an obvious diversion, and both of them knew it.

Hinata sighed, leaned forwards, and said, "I'm not stupid, Komaeda. I know what you think of me."

"Which is?"

"You don't think I belong here," said Hinata. "On this trip, or with my friends, or even at Hope's Peak at all."

"Well, of course not. You simply don't measure up to the Ultimates," Komaeda replied instantly. "But it's okay! I don't belong, either!"

"That's... not as comforting as you think it is." Hinata considered for a moment that if *this* was where an obsession with talent lead to, he should probably stop caring so much about his own lack of it.

"I do think we're alike on a certain level, you know," Komaeda said slowly. "We're both spectators to the talent around us. We both like to *watch*. Neither of us have much - or any - talent of our own, despite how much we may want it, and that means that neither of us will ever really belong with the others. The most we can be is stepping stones for their hope."

"I'm *nothing* like you," Hinata bristled. Some of Komaeda words had hit a bit too close to home, and that only made him angrier. "And even if you think I am, why do you act like you're so much better than me?"

"Because, Hinata." Komaeda laced his fingers together. "Even if my talent doesn't measure up, at the end of the day, I, unlike you, am still an Ultimate."

"Sure." Hinata gripped the wheel tighter, kept his eyes on the road, and said, "But you, *unlike me*, are an asshole."

Neither one of them spoke after that.

When they finally reached the outskirts of Asahikawa, it was already nighttime. Hinata hadn't eaten anything since lunch, so he'd pulled the car into a roadside fast-food drive-through and ordered a burger, fries, and a milkshake. Komaeda had ordered a kid's meal. Apparently he wanted to 'test his luck' by finding whatever toy was inside. *Weirdo*.

Hinata pulled away from the window, take-out bag balanced on the center console, and found a parking spot near the edge of the lot. (He kept the engine running, though, because he was not ready to hotwire the car again.) Before he grabbed his food, he shrugged off his jacket and tossed it in the backseat, then began rolling up his sleeves to his elbows. He'd just finished removing his tie when he noticed Komaeda staring at him with an expression he

couldn't quite place. Contempt, perhaps. Hinata unbuttoned his collar half out of spite and matched his gaze.

"Something to say, Komaeda?"

"That's, um," Komaeda stuttered, looking strangely flushed, "O- Of course you would want to remove your Reserve Course uniform before anyone saw you wearing it!"

Hinata scowled at him. Komaeda had taken off his uniform jacket earlier, but he was still wearing his green and red striped sweater, collared shirt, and tie. Hinata realized he'd never seen the other boy without several layers of clothing on, and he wondered for a moment what Komaeda might look like with his clothes off.

Uh.

Not like *that*, Hinata clarified to no one in particular.

Quickly, he cleared his throat and turned away from Komaeda. "Yeah, sure, *I'm* the weird one for not wanting to wear my school uniform all the time." He grabbed his food from the bag and shoved some fries into his mouth as some sort of distraction.

Komaeda picked up his kid's meal, too, but when he opened it, his face fell. "Ah, bad luck again." He sadly plucked his toy from the box. "They gave me Monokuma."

Hinata wrinkled his nose in disgust. Monokuma was the worst cartoon mascot in all of Japan, if not the world. It was like some company had thought, '*what if Hello Kitty was a half-and-half monochrome asshole?*' and then decided to put him fucking everywhere.

"I seriously hate that thing."

"Me, too," lamented Komaeda. "He fills me with despair."

"I guess your kids meal kinda sucks," Hinata said, taking a long sip of his milkshake.

Komaeda narrowed his eyes. "At least I'm not drinking a beverage made of lard."

Hinata glanced at his milkshake. "Do you mean this?" He held it up, then paused. "Wait, you think they put *lard* in milkshakes?"

"Are you... not supposed to?" Komaeda paused, then looked down. "Oh, no. That explains why I'm not allowed to volunteer at the Hope's Peak festivals anymore."

Hinata stared at him blankly. "Dude, what kind of life do you *live?*"

"I don't think you want an answer to that question."

Hinata snorted, took a sip of his milkshake, then asked, "Hey, we're gonna be... okay on this trip, aren't we?" He paused. "I mean, you're not gonna kill me or anything, right?"

Komaeda took a sip of his soda, head tilted in consideration. "Not intentionally."

“Oh, *thanks*, buddy,” Hinata sighed and reached across the console to grab another fry.
“That’s real comforting.”

“...Hinata?”

“Hm?”

“Stop stealing my fries.”

They found a hotel in town about twenty minutes later. It was a small place, but it looked clean and parking was free, so Hinata didn’t care. He dropped Komaeda off at the entrance to book a room, then drove around to the back parking lot. Dreading the thought of hotwiring the car once again in the morning, Hinata switched it off, sighed, and reminded himself that this would all be over in just a few days. After that, he would never even have to speak to Nagito Komaeda again. Slightly comforted by the thought, he walked back to the hotel entrance and approached Komaeda himself, who was still talking to the man at the front desk. When he got closer, though, he realized that it might have been a mistake to let Komaeda inside on his own.

“...after all, no matter how hard a small dog tries, it will never become a large dog,” Komaeda was saying to the receptionist. “No matter how hard a penguin tries, there’s no way it will ever soar through the sky... which means... unworthy humans will never become worthy, no matter what they do, right?”

“Hey!” Hinata greeted pointedly, cutting the other boy off. The front desk guy looked half-relieved, half-wary. “Uh! What I think he *means* to say is, can we get a room for tonight?”

The receptionist blinked, confused by the sudden shift in tone. “Is, um... Is the basic room alright?”

“Yeah, sure, that’d be great,” Hinata said, desperate to end this interaction as soon as possible.

He nodded, still seeming a bit bewildered. “Your total comes to 3,000 yen.”

Komaeda produced a credit card from seemingly nowhere and swiped it through the chip reader. When it went through, the receptionist produced two room keys from behind the desk.

“Room 11, straight down to the left. Your checkout time is 10:00 AM tomorrow.”

Hinata took the keys, handed one to Komaeda, then looked back at the receptionist gratefully. “Thank you. Seriously.”

“Enjoy your stay!” he said.

Not likely, he thought.

As the two started walking towards their room, Hinata turned to Komaeda accusingly. “I asked you to book a room, dude. How the hell did you end up monologuing to the

receptionist?”

Komaeda shrugged. “It seems conversation is a lost art.”

“*Conversation*,” Hinata repeated incredulously, stopping in front of door labeled ‘11.’

He swiped his key card through the scanner (it didn’t work the first time, but went through the second) and pulled open the door, Komaeda following behind him. Hinata stepped into the room, toed off his shoes, and heard the sound of Komaeda closing the door behind him. He let out a deep breath, ready to fall asleep right then and there - and that’s when he saw the bed.

Bed *singular*.

“Ah. Only one, hm?” Komaeda mumbled. “Such despair...”

For the first time in his life, Hinata was inclined to agree with Komaeda’s cryptic rambling. “You’re telling me,” he groaned.

Komaeda eyed him shiftily. “Is there... a reason you booked us a room like this, Hinata?”

Hinata shot him a harsh glare. “I was just trying to clean up your mess with the receptionist! How was I supposed to know that *this* was the basic room?”

“I suppose we could go back out and request a different one,” Komaeda said. “With two beds. Preferably as far away from each other as humanly possible.”

Hinata groaned. “As much as I’d like that - and trust me, it’s a lot - we are *not* bothering that front desk guy again.”

“Well,” Komaeda said, looking away, “obviously both of us aren’t going to sleep here.”

“Obviously,” Hinata repeated awkwardly.

“It’s absolutely repulsive to even consider, right?” said Komaeda with a dark, empty laugh.

Now Hinata was starting to get annoyed. He didn’t exactly want to sleep next to Komaeda either, but that didn’t mean Komaeda had to be such a dick about it. He just sighed and gave a stilted nod.

Undeterred, Komaeda continued on. “Even the thought of it is sickening! Sleeping next to such a worthless, revolting, loathsome-”

“*Please* shut up,” Hinata growled.

At least that got Komaeda’s attention. He turned towards Hinata, brow furrowed. “...Have I said something objectionable?”

“You could say that.” Hinata scowled, facing Komaeda and crossing his arms. “I don’t want to share the bed with you either, but at least I’m not being shitty about it on purpose.”

Komaeda narrowed his eyes. “What, exactly, do you mean?”

“I know you think I’m the worst, but I don’t know why you have to insult me about everything!”

“I could simply never even imagine someone willing to be so close to *me* without feeling overwhelmingly disgusted!”

They'd spoken at the same time, which meant that for the few seconds it took both of them to recognize the other's words, it was deadly silent. Hinata stared blankly at Komaeda as he finally realized, *oh. Komaeda hadn't been talking about Hinata - he'd been talking about himself.*

“...No one should be subjected to sharing a bed with someone like me,” said Komaeda, a bit quieter than he'd been before. “Not even *you*. I- I'll sleep on the floor. Or in the hallway, if that's easier, or maybe you can even throw me outside with the raccoons-”

“Huh?” Hinata cut him off. “Listen, I don’t want to sleep on the floor, or... any of those other places, for that matter, but I’m not gonna make you sleep there either. We can just... share?”

Komaeda glanced at him warily. “You... wouldn't be too disgusted?”

"No?" Hinata shot him a confused look. “Would *you*?”

“...I suppose not.” Komaeda shifted uneasily. He was staring at the ground, cheeks pink and hands tightly wound together, and *holy shit, he was actually embarrassed.*

Hinata stared at him, awestruck. Maybe he was a real person after all. “So it’s settled.”

Komaeda nodded slowly, then gestured towards the bathroom, saying, “I should go... get ready to sleep.”

Hinata shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’ll, uh. I’ll be here.”

As Komaeda left, Hinata sat on the edge of the bed and busied himself with searching through his own backpack. His suitcase holding his actual clothes and luggage was, of course, on the bus, so all he had was the school uniform he was wearing and whatever he could find in the stupid bag. There was the Nintendo DS Nanami had given him on his last birthday, his toothbrush and toothpaste, a couple loose pens, a singular packet of protein powder from Nidai, a bottle of water, Koizumi’s old camera, headphones, a phone charger, his wallet, and some sort of talisman Tanaka had made for him. Normal stuff, for the most part, but not much that would be useful to him here.

Hinata set the backpack back on the hotel desk before returning to the bed. He just sat there for a moment, staring at the blank white ceiling, and began to consider the gravity of his situation. He was lost, and not just geographically. He was about to be stuck with Nagito Komaeda, the one person who hated him most, for almost a week. He’d never experienced anything like this before. He wasn't sure *anyone* had. It was like he was standing on the edge of a cliff at night, about to jump and unable to see what was at the bottom.

Nervously bouncing his leg against the floor, he pulled out his phone and scrolled through his contacts. When he found the one he was searching for, he hit call and pressed the phone to his ear, listening to the droning dial tone. It just kept on ringing, and Hinata was about to give up entirely when he finally heard the the other line pick up.

“...Hey.”

“Holy shit, Nanami.” Hinata could barely hide the relief he was feeling. He flopped back against the bed, phone still pressed to his ear. “Thanks for picking up.”

“Course, Hinata.” She yawned. “...How’s your road trip going?”

“I don’t even know what the hell is going on, dude. I had to hotwire a car - which I’m ninety-nine percent sure is illegal, by the way - it’s gonna take at least four days to get back, cause I’m the only one who has a license, Komaeda ordered a kid’s meal from McDonalds, and now we’re staying at some random hotel in Asahikawa.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Also, please don’t listen to Soda. It’s not a *road trip*,” he added weakly.

“...He ordered a kid’s meal?”

“Yeah, he wanted to see what the toy was, I guess.”

"Besides that..." Nanami hummed. "You must have a lot to deal with right now, Hinata."

Hinata nodded intently. “And the worst part is, I have absolutely no idea what I’m supposed to do next.”

“I can understand why you’re so overwhelmed,” Nanami said gently, “but I don’t think stressing about it will change anything. It’s like, sometimes, when I’m playing a really hard game, I get frustrated - but that only makes me play worse. I think that when things are stressful, all you can do is try to make the best of your circumstances.”

“...I guess you’re right,” Hinata admitted.

“Calm down a bit, okay, Hinata?” Nanami’s sleepy voice was oddly comforting. “You know, you can be pretty skeptical sometimes.”

“Huh.” Hinata tilted his head. “It’s weird, but Komaeda said the exact same thing.”

“I know this is a really strange situation, but it’s you. You always figure out the right thing to do. So everything’s gonna turn out alright.” She paused. “...Probably.”

“Thanks, Nanami,” he said, letting out a sigh of relief.

“You know you can always talk to me, right, Hinata?” she asked, then yawned loudly. “Ah... maybe not *right* now, though...” She cut herself off with another yawn.

Hinata could picture the look on her face; glazed eyes, slightly parted lips, struggling to keep herself conscious when she was on the verge of falling asleep. He gave a low laugh,

readjusting the phone in his hand. “Yeah, yeah. Dream about Pokemon or whatever. G’night, Nanami.”

“Zzz...Ah, g’night, Hinata...zzzz...”

Still smiling, Hinata hung up the phone. He got up, stretched, brushed his teeth in the small sink in the room, drank some water, and by the time he was about to return to the bed, Komaeda came out of the bathroom.

They stared at each other from across the room. Biting the bullet, Hinata made the first move, stepping forwards and laying down on the side near the window. Komaeda slowly followed behind, laying on the other side of the bed, as far away from Hinata as possible.

Hinata would have laughed if it wasn’t so tragic. They were both fully clothed, laying on opposite ends of a hotel bed, as far away from each other as it would permit. They didn’t like each other, yet they were stuck together. Komaeda’s bad luck may have been starting to make sense, because Hinata couldn’t think of any other explanation for how he could have ended up in a situation like this.

With a sigh, he reached over to the bedside table and turned off the lamp, leaving them in darkness. The only light now was the pale moon shining in from the window. Hinata laid back down on his side, and despite how far apart they were, he could still feel the warmth of Komaeda’s body behind him. He shook his head slightly, trying to rationalize it to himself. People slept in the same bed normally all the time, right? Kids at a sleepover. Cheap roommates who could only afford one mattress. Those crazy guys who hiked Mount Everest huddling for warmth in a tent.

Even so, he spared a glance over his shoulder at Komaeda. The other boy was almost halfway off the edge, awkwardly keeping his slender body propped against the bed. That position couldn’t be comfortable, and knowing Komaeda’s luck, he would somehow get a concussion just by falling off the side of the bed. And that would just make it more troublesome for everyone, so Hinata had to do *something*.

“Komaeda.” He rolled over and watched with narrowed eyes as the other boy turned to look at him, confusion evident on his face. “You’re gonna roll off the side.”

If anything, that only sent Komaeda further off the edge. “G-good! That’s probably what I deserve.”

With an exasperated sigh, Hinata grabbed Komaeda’s wrist and used the leverage to pull the other boy to the center of the bed. Which, *wow, was actually kind of a stupid plan*, given that all Hinata had really done was drag Komaeda closer to himself, leaving them almost nose-to-nose lying next to each other.

With a jolt, Hinata dropped Komaeda’s wrist like it was a live grenade, watching as it fell limply back on the bed. “See?” he said anyways, just to prove a point. “It’s fine.”

“I-If you’re sure-”

“Komaeda,” Hinata groaned as he rolled onto his back, exhaustion taking over his body. He felt his eyes begin to close as he mumbled, “Just... go to sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

i'm going to try to post a new chapter every week or so, let me know what you think in the comments!!

day 2

Chapter Summary

Only Komaeda could combine tourist traps, knife fights, and partial nudity into one road trip.

Chapter Notes

there was an issue so i had to reupload the chapter, sorry!! i hope you enjoy!!

Hinata had first met Komaeda on a rainy day near the end of his first year.

He'd left the school library just as it was closing, preparing to walk back across campus to his dorm, but he'd been forced to stop at the edge of the overhang. The light rain from earlier had become torrential, falling in buckets from the cloudy gray sky above. Hinata remembered how odd that had been; he had thought it was unnatural that the storm could have ramped up so quickly, and he'd muttered a few curses about the weather channel before looking back at the sky. Carefully, he'd stuck a hand out of the overhang to test the rain - then immediately jerked it back. A sudden flood of water had splashed down from the roof, soaking his whole sleeve through. With an exasperated sigh, Hinata took off his uniform jacket and shoved it in his backpack. He hadn't brought an umbrella, and there was no way he was getting all the way across campus in a storm like this, so it seemed his only option was to wait out the rainstorm under the library entryway. He'd just resigned himself to a cold evening alone when a clear, lilting voice rang out from behind him.

"Forgot your umbrella?"

Hinata had turned to face the source of the voice; behind him, a skinny teenage boy in a Main Course uniform was leaning against the library doorway. He closed the door behind him as he walked up to Hinata, standing next to him and rocking on his heels. From close up, Hinata noticed with a twinge of annoyance that the guy was slightly taller than him. His disheveled hair matched the color of the clouds, his pale green eyes perfectly reflected the rainy sky, and Hinata suddenly realized he'd gotten so distracted that he'd forgotten he'd been asked a question.

"You're one to talk," he shot back. "You don't have an umbrella, either."

The guy laughed. It was a pleasant sound, if a bit raspy. "I suppose you're right." He glanced out at the rain with a slight frown. "I've seriously got no luck at all."

“Same as me, then,” Hinata said.

When Hinata looked to the side, he saw the guy staring at him with wide eyes and a small, unreadable smile on his face. “...Maybe you’re right,” he said quietly.

Hinata didn’t quite know what to make of that, so he didn’t reply. The two stayed silent for a few moments, listening to the sound of rain against the buildings.

"How long would you guess we're gonna be stuck here?" Hinata asked eventually.

"Knowing me, the rain's not going to let up anytime soon," the other boy said, leaning forwards a bit to watch the storm.

Hinata watched for a moment too, then let out a groan. “Man, I seriously need to stop trusting the weather channel.”

The guy laughed again. It was strangely disarming, like seeing him smile was enough to distract Hinata from his worries entirely. “If only our school had an Ultimate Meteorologist - we’d never have to worry about getting caught in storms again!” he said lightly.

Hinata snorted. “There’s a talent I wish I had.”

“Much better than my worthless talent, at least.” The guy tilted his head, unruly white curls falling just slightly into his eyes. “But as it is, we’re probably going to be stuck here for a while.”

Hinata raised an eyebrow. “For some reason, it doesn’t really sound like you’re that upset about it.”

“I might be, if I was alone.” He was looking at the ground. “But I’m beginning to think this rain might have been good luck after all.”

Hinata had an odd feeling that he’d been complimented, but he couldn’t quite figure out how. He felt heat rise to his face anyways. “What, you seriously think it’s good luck to get trapped outside in the middle of a raging thunderstorm?”

“If I’m here with you, I think it might be,” the boy said softly. “The rain lead to us meeting, didn’t it?”

“...Yeah.” Hinata tried to bite back his smile, but he found himself grinning anyways. “I guess it did.”

The guy tentatively offered out his hand, like he was afraid it might be rejected. “I’m Nagito Komaeda, by the way.”

Hinata shook his hand tightly. Komaeda’s hand was soft, and his fingers wrapped around Hinata’s like they were meant to stay there. “Hajime Hinata.”

And with that, the rain suddenly stopped. Both boys turned in unison to watch as the storm clouds began to fade away, more quickly than should have been possible. The last rays of the

setting sun pierced through the now-thin cloud cover, casting a soft, silver-lined light on everything around them.

“Storm’s over,” marveled Hinata, still holding Komaeda’s hand.

Komaeda was staring back at him, wide-eyed. “...This really was good luck,” he said breathlessly.

Hinata finally let go of his hand, feeling strangely empty without the contact. Komaeda left his uncertain hand held out for a moment before putting it down.

“Your name...” Komaeda murmured curiously. “Forgive me, but I feel like I’ve heard it somewhere before.” In an instant, something new and cold flashed through his eyes. “Hajime...Hinata? You’re Nanami’s friend, aren’t you?” His gaze hardened. “...You’re from the *Reserve Course*?”

Hinata glanced down, remembering that he’d taken off his soaked uniform jacket; now there was almost nothing distinguishing him from a Main Course student. He looked up with a frown, confused at the other boy’s sudden change in demeanor. *Hadn’t it been just a few seconds ago that Komaeda was talking about how it must have been good luck that they’d met?* “Yeah,” Hinata replied, a bit confrontational. “I am.”

“...I’ve changed my mind,” Komaeda said, his voice practically dripping with disdain. “Meeting a worthless member of the masses was obviously bad luck. I can’t believe I ever thought you were-” He hesitated, taking a step back. “Forget it. This means nothing.”

And with that, Komaeda had walked away, the ripples from his footsteps in the left-behind rain puddles the only indication he’d been there at all.

Hinata slowly blinked his eyes open, squinting at the light streaming through the windows. He’d dreamt of his and Komaeda’s first meeting, though he has no idea *why*. Maybe so much time stuck with the guy had started stirring up weird old memories - memories he’d rather not think about in the daylight.

The way Komaeda had turned on him so suddenly still sent pangs of hurt through his chest. It was stupid, and he knew it was stupid.

The guy was an asshole. That was it.

Contented by that conclusion, Hinata yawned and closed his eyes again, not quite ready to face the new day just yet. The pillows were soft, the morning light was still dim, and the arm wrapped around his waist was a comforting warmth as he started drifting off again.

The arm... around... his waist?

Hinata’s eyes shot open, feeling as if he’d been shocked out of sleep - and he felt his eyes go even wider at the sight he was greeted with. Komaeda’s head was resting on Hinata’s chest, tucked just underneath his chin, and he’d thrown one arm around Hinata’s waist. If that wasn’t

enough, Hinata's own body had betrayed him in his sleep; he'd wrapped one of his own arms around Komaeda's back, pulling him in closer and holding him tightly to his chest.

Now fully awake, Hinata jolted up, knocking his head against the wall - which, of course, only served to wake up Komaeda, too. Hinata watched in horror as Komaeda's eyes slowly blinked open to stare straight down at Hinata's chest, then flicked to his face, confused.

In an instant, both of them scrambled backwards, ending up on opposite ends of the bed, the same places they'd been *trying* to sleep last night. They stared at each other for a wordless minute, equally floored.

"What, exactly, were you doing, Hinata?" Komaeda's voice was equal parts embarrassed and accusatory.

"Me? What were *you* doing?" Hinata echoed.

"You think *I* would deign to get so close to a Reserve Course-"

"Like I'd *ever* choose to end up like that-"

"Well, I'm not the one who-"

Hinata buried his face in his hands. "Oh my god, this is so *stupid*," he groaned, rolling off the bed onto his feet. "Just - get ready so we can get out of here, alright? Let's not drag this out any longer than we have to."

He wasn't entirely sure if Komaeda had heard him, given the other boy was just sitting on the edge of the bed, wide-eyed and red-faced, looking at his hands and mumbling something to himself.

"Oookay. You have fun with, uh. That. We're leaving in-" Hinata's eyes flicked to the clock on the bedside table, which flashed 8:50. "-ten minutes."

And with that, Hinata shut himself in the bathroom, leaning back against the door and letting out a deep breath. He was *not* going to think about what just happened, he told himself. That was a problem for another day's Hinata.

He stepped towards the sink, making a futile attempt to smooth out the wrinkles in his shirt and brushing his teeth with more intensity than necessary. When he was done, he looked up at the mirror. The dark circles under his eyes weren't nearly as bad as usual. He must have actually slept pretty well last night. The bed was much more comfortable than the one he had at the dorm, and, to be completely honest, Komaeda's presence had been almost comforting, arms wrapped around him, slotted together, and- *nope*.

Hinata quickly turned on the faucet and splashed some cold water on his face, scowling. He needed to get some coffee as soon as possible, because there was clearly something wrong with his brain this morning.

When he returned to the room, Komaeda had apparently gotten over... whatever was going on with him. He was now standing in front of the mirror, backpack slung over his shoulder,

trying to comb through his messy hair with his fingers. Unlike Hinata, he was still wearing his full school uniform, which was somehow unwrinkled despite the fact that he'd slept in his clothes.

They headed to the lobby to check out, and thankfully, the girl at the front desk wasn't the receptionist they'd spoken to last night. Before they left, Hinata lead them to the row of vending machines in a hallway right off the lobby. He searched for iced coffee, found it in the one on the end, threw in some money, and leaned down to press D2.

"...Can you get me one too?" Komaeda called from behind him.

Hinata grabbed his cold drink from the receptacle and turned towards him. "Get it yourself."

Komaeda raised his eyebrows. "I'm sure you're aware of my tragic history with vending machines, Hinata."

Hinata grimaced, reminded of the time he'd seen Komaeda trekking across campus with a wagon full of Dr. Hopper. "Unfortunately." Reluctantly, he added another 100 yen and tapped the button.

When the can was dropped into the box, he pulled it out of the machine. It felt freezing in his hand, so he reached up and pressed it to Komaeda's face. Komaeda scrunched up his nose, batting it away, as Hinata snickered in amusement. He finally grabbed the can from Hinata, scowling. Hinata shrugged at him before popping open his own can and taking a sip.

And with that, they went around back to the parking lot. Komaeda sparked the starter wires, the car somehow didn't blow up, and they drove away.

Komaeda was absolutely *terrible* at giving directions.

Seriously, the worst. First of all, he was being his usual difficult self. Second, he was trying to navigate with the ingenious combination of his flip phone and a crumpled-up map they'd found in the glovebox. Hinata had tried to get him to use his own slightly cracked iPhone 4, *because come on, it's 2012, get with the times*, but apparently Komaeda was incapable of using any technology that didn't have buttons.

So they were lost. Hinata had been circling around Asahikawa for the last half-hour, unable to find the route to the expressway.

"Turn onto... ah, Kinseibashi-Dori Street?" Komaeda tilted the map sideways, then looked down at his phone. "Or perhaps that one is Dobutsuen-Dori..."

Hinata sighed as he took what must have been another wrong turn. "I can't believe you're still trying to use your burner phone for this. Why do you even own something like that?"

"I keep accidentally breaking the phones I get, so there's no point in buying expensive ones," Komaeda said, turning the map upside down. "It doesn't really matter what phone I have, though. It's not as if anyone ever calls me."

“...Oh.” Hinata’s gaze flicked towards him for a moment before returning to the road. “I mean, uh. That thing’s still gotta have some kind of actual GPS, right?”

“I can check.” Komaeda nodded and tapped a few buttons, before smiling. “Ah, here it is!” He propped the phone on the dashboard.

“I think we can try to get to Hakodate today, which will shorten this trip by a lot, so put that in.” Hinata watched as he entered the location. “Does your navigation system say directions out loud?”

Suddenly, the tinny speakers of Komaeda’s phone blared to life. “I’m not just a navigation system! I...am...Monokuma!”

Hinata had to swerve back into his lane. “What the *fuck?*”

The phone, regrettably, kept going. “I’ve been transported to your GPS to bring you a whole new world of adventure and passion! You’re excited, aren’t you? Say you’re excited!” There was a small cartoon Monokuma at the edge of the screen, seeming to stand on the map.

“Dude, what’s wrong with your phone?” Hinata asked, pained.

“Ah, it appears to be a new promotion featuring Monokuma...” Komaeda mumbled, staring down at the screen. “Such despair...”

“Puhuhu... turn left onto Asahikawa-Shindo Road in 0.4 miles! Let’s hurry up and begin our lovey-dovey honeymoon together!”

Hinata tried to follow the directions, he really did, but listening to Monokuma’s voice was almost unbearable - pun *not* intended.

“You missed the turn!” Phone-Monokuma blared. “Ya see, every human makes stupid mistakes, things they have to go back and fix. But I don’t! Cause I’m a bear.”

Hinata turned onto another street, circling back to his original location. Just as he was about to make the turn, though, Komaeda started undoing the top button of his collar, and Hinata drove straight past it.

“You passed the turn again, but don’t sweat the small stuff! That’s my motto. Whoa, I sounded pretty cool just now, don’tcha think? Did you fall in love with me?”

Komaeda paused, looking up from his collar. “Is your driving always like this?” he asked loftily.

Hinata grit his teeth, but he couldn’t really tell if he was more frustrated with himself or with Komaeda. Both, probably. “*Please* stop talking.” He flipped the car around, went back, and finally got the turn right.

They kept driving, but Komaeda never got any better at giving directions, and Hinata never got any better at taking them. That, and Komaeda made them pull over at every stupid roadside attraction they passed. Something about ‘*viewing the world’s hope,*’ or whatever he

was always talking about. Hinata went with him, telling himself it was only so he didn't get bored enough to fall asleep at the wheel. Throughout the day, they'd seen 'The World's Smallest Grain of Rice,' 'Hokkaido's Biggest Flower Field,' and 'Sapporo's Best Roadside Taiyaki.' Biggest, worst, best - Komaeda, it seemed, felt only in extremes.

It was dark out by the time they stopped at a gas station in the middle of nowhere. Hinata had no idea where they'd ended up, seeing as neither Komaeda nor his phone's stupid navigation system had been any help at all the several times they'd gotten lost. The station looked pretty old, but at least it had a convenience store.

He stepped out of the car, wallet in hand, and leaned down to look at Komaeda. "Go inside and get some food and drinks for tonight," he said, gesturing vaguely to the store. "I'll fill up the car."

Komaeda nodded and started off towards the store. Hinata approached the ancient machine, put in his credit card, selected a fuel grade, and pulled out the gas nozzle. He unscrewed the cap on the side of the car and pushed in the nozzle, pressing it down and watching as the numbers ticked up on the counter. When it was near what he guessed was full, he returned the nozzle and screwed the cap back on, leaning against the car.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the guy at the spot next to his begin to approach him. He quickly turned to the side to see a man with long, greasy hair eyeing his car curiously.

"Oi." The man's gaze flicked up from examining the car to stare straight at Hinata. "This car," he said. "Is it really yours?"

Hinata froze in place. "Uh, yeah," he said nervously. "This is my car. I own it. Legally."

"Huh," the guy said, taking a step closer. "So *you're* the guy who hit my car in the parking lot!" he yelled, jabbing an accusatory finger in his face. "Fuck you, asshole, I had to get a whole new door because of you!"

Hinata scrambled backwards, shaking his head. "Wait, no—"

"No denying it now, you little shit! I'd recognize your ugly-ass car anywhere!" The man reached into his heavy jacket and pulled out a knife. "Now I'm gonna show you what happens when you mess with Haiji Towa!"

Fear coursing through his body, Hinata hastened to explain. "Listen, okay? It's not my car, I just found it on the side of the highway and hotwired it yesterday!"

"That's the most unbelievable story I've ever heard," the guy scoffed.

"Yeah, that's what I said too - *hey!*"

The man suddenly pushed Hinata towards the edge of the gas station, out of view from the fluorescent lights. They were on the border of the parking lot and a dark field of muddy grass. Hinata swallowed over the lump in his throat, terrified. He turned around to face Towa, and as he did, he heard the chime of the convenience store door.

“They didn’t have the chips you wanted, so I had to get-” Komaeda looked up and stopped in his tracks. “Ah.”

Towa whipped around to stare at him, but he kept the knife aimed at Hinata. “You a friend of his?” he called.

Komaeda tilted his head. “I wouldn’t say that. *Classmate* would probably be more accurate - hm, but even that’s a stretch, seeing as I’m the Ultimate Lucky Student, and he’s just-”

“Really, dude? *Now?*” Hinata called, irritation momentarily replacing fear.

Towa’s expression darkened. “Get over there and don’t fuckin’ move.”

Komaeda raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, still holding a plastic convenience store bag, and slowly approached Hinata. “Hm,” he muttered. “This isn’t ideal.”

“Not ideal?” Hinata hissed.

“Well, do you have another word for it?” Komaeda whispered back.

“*Several.*”

Komaeda turned back to Towa. “If I may ask, what did Hinata do to make you so angry?”

“Oi-”

“Your buddy here hit my car a month ago,” Towa growled. “You see, I was just leaving my favorite restaurant, and I’d gotten their best meal, the homemade katsudon. Then, out of nowhere, this ugly-ass green car blows through the parking lot and hits my car, totaling it, before speeding away. Now me, having to watch this whole thing - well, I’m so upset that I drop my piping hot katsudon right onto my brand-new leather shoes, ruining them and scalding my feet in the process.”

“Wow,” Komaeda said. “You must have *terrible* luck for something like that to happen.”

"Damn right," crowed Towa.

Komaeda nodded. “Ah, but no matter how bad your luck is, I can assure you it’s nowhere near as bad as mine.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Let me explain it to you in a way you can understand,” he said, pulling a can of soda from the bag. “For example, imagine I threw this can into the air right now. How incredibly unlucky would I have to be for the can to hit someone on the way down?”

Towa scoffed. “There’s no way that would happen.”

Komaeda shrugged. “Maybe you’re right, maybe you aren’t. Regardless, I don’t think that would be a wise bet to make. So tell me, are you feeling unlucky right now?” An unsettling

smile appeared on his face. "Because I am." And with that, he tossed the soda can up in the air.

It flew towards the sky, blocking out the moon, and, for a moment, Hinata was convinced it was actually going to hit Towa. But, at the last minute, the man sidestepped, leaving the can to fall to the ground and ricochet in the opposite direction completely.

"You missed," he growled.

Komaeda hummed. "Give it a moment, please."

Hinata watched in awe as the can seemed to ignore the basic laws of physics completely. It bounced off the convenience store wall, hit the gas nozzle, and rebounded back straight into Towa's head with a loud *thwack*. The man wobbled for a moment, his eyes rolling up in his head, before he collapsed. His weight careened forwards like a ton of bricks, slamming both Hinata and Komaeda to the muddy ground below.

Hinata braced himself on his hands against the dirt, but he still felt the wind get knocked out of him. "The guy's out cold," he wheezed, pushing the body to the side.

Komaeda picked up the can of soda and stood to his feet, wiping his muddy hands on his pants. "We should really drive away before he wakes up," he said, popping open the can and taking a sip. "I can't imagine my luck will last for long."

Hinata didn't know how long he'd been driving for when he finally felt himself relax. He was surrounded by trees on either side of the forest highway, reaching up tall into the clear night sky, and they were the only car around for miles, which meant that Towa guy hadn't followed them. The road was illuminated by the moon and the glare of the car's old headlights, seeming to go on forever. The sight was oddly calming, and Hinata let himself breathe it in. It was like the normal world around him had collapsed entirely, rebuilding an entire universe in which the only things to exist were himself, the old car, and the country road.

And Komaeda.

Hinata shifted slightly in his seat, glancing at the passenger seat for only half a second before turning his eyes back to the road. "Thanks for, y'know," he said, shrugging sharply. "Not letting me get killed."

Komaeda turned towards him. "You... don't have to thank me," he said, sounding mildly confused. "I barely even did anything."

"Man." Hinata shook his head incredulously. "Even with a knife to your throat, you're still the same dependably weird guy." He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. "Can I ask you a question?"

"I doubt I'll be able to give you a satisfactory answer," Komaeda replied, but it wasn't technically a *no*.

“...How did you stay so calm?”

“Because of hope, Hinata,” Komaeda said, a small, undecipherable smile appearing on his lips. “With the life that I’ve led, I’ve learned that I can get through any kind of despair as long as I have hope that my luck will change for the better. No matter how bad things get, I always believe in the brilliance of hope. I have to.”

“...Huh.” Hinata had to pause, because that had... actually made sense. “Shit, I really must be losing it if your weird hope speeches are actually making me feel better.”

Komaeda froze in his seat. “You...really...?”

Hinata shrugged, embarrassed, and returned his eyes to the road. “I guess so.”

“Oh,” he said quietly. Before Hinata could even *begin* to comprehend what that meant, Komaeda continued on. “Anyways, this wasn’t really a big deal. It’s not the first time I’ve been held at knife point.”

“It’s- it’s *not*?” Hinata felt his jaw drop. “Komaeda, when the hell has that ever happened to you before?”

“Middle school,” Komaeda answered simply.

“Jeez, I didn’t take you for the middle school delinquent type.”

“It’s not that,” Komaeda replied. “It’s... um. You know what? You... don’t have to hear it. It would probably bore you, and you wouldn’t care to know in the first place, so-”

“Try me,” Hinata said. “You can talk about it if you want to.”

Komaeda's expression was one of shock, like he hadn't even considered someone would care. He cleared his throat softly, looking down. “Alright. Um. I was walking home from school one day, and out of nowhere, this man dragged me into his car and kidnapped me. He kept me as a hostage for a while, but when he realized I had no one who would pay my ransom, he stuffed me in a trash bag and left me to die.”

“Oh, shit, dude, are you-”

Komaeda waved a flippant hand in the air. “It turned out fine, of course. By complete coincidence, I found a lottery ticket inside the trash bag, and after I was safely taken in by the police, I checked out the numbers without giving it much thought... Surprise! I won 30 billion yen! Even I was amazed by this splendid act of good luck.”

“I-I'm sorry, Komaeda. That's horrible.”

“I don't see it that way.” Komaeda shifted in his seat. “...I’m aware that's not exactly a normal response, but, well. I already know how my life is going to end, and it’s not by the hands of some worthless member of the masses.” He looked out the side window, fingers trailing along the glass. “I’m going to die due to my own luck. It’s almost happened several times

before, and I'm quite sure that's the only way I'm going to go out. Someday I am going to die alone, and it will be my own fault. It's inevitable, so I'm not scared."

Hinata frowned. "That's a stupid ending, isn't it?"

Komaeda turned towards him, wide-eyed. "I- what?"

"I said, that's a stupid ending. Your life means more than just what your luck dictates."

"Ah, Hinata." He leaned back in the passenger seat, an odd expression crossing over his face. "How I wish that was true."

Hinata pulled over at a motel in the woods soon after that. He still didn't quite know where they were, but he was so tired that it didn't really matter. Besides, this was probably one of the only places that would accept him and Komaeda - the way they looked right now, carrying no real luggage and wearing mud-splattered school uniforms, was suspicious enough already.

The girl at the front desk welcomed them in, and Hinata gave her a greeting before asking the horribly awkward question he knew he had to ask. "This is gonna sound weird, but... what city are we in?"

"About twenty minutes from Chitose," the girl responded cheerfully.

Hinata closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly distressed. "...Oh."

"Ah, Hinata?" Komaeda asked cautiously.

"That's... four hours away from where we were supposed to be," he groaned. "Getting lost just added a whole other day to the trip."

"...Oh," Komaeda repeated.

Hinata just sighed and turned back to the receptionist, exhausted. "Is there a place to wash clothes here?"

She nodded. "Yes, all rooms on the second floor have access to a small laundromat."

"Perfect, we'll take a room on the second floor. *Two beds*," he clarified.

The receptionist leaned down to check the computer, then looked back up with a small frown. "Ah, I'm sorry, sir. The only rooms available on the second floor are singles. Is that alright?"

Hinata paused, weighing the pros and cons of sleeping covered in mud and sleeping next to Komaeda. Komaeda just *barely* won out. "...Yeah, that's fine." He turned to Komaeda, whispering, "I mean, you're okay with it, right?"

Komaeda looked utterly confused by the idea, but he didn't look opposed, and after a moment he nodded blankly and pulled out a credit card.

They paid for the room, got their key cards, which thankfully included laundromat access, and headed up the stairs to the second floor. They started towards the laundromat first, wanting to get out of their muddy clothes as soon as possible.

But when they actually got to the room, Hinata began to see the problem. He needed to wash his clothes, but they were also the only pair of clothes he had with him. And that meant that he was going to have to take off his clothes. In a tiny room. With Nagito Komaeda.

He spared a glance at the boy next to him, who, judging by the mortified look on his face, had reached the same unfortunate conclusion.

“This is... kind of indecent, isn’t it?” Komaeda fidgeted with the dirt-caked cuff of his sleeve, making a disgusted face as he touched it.

“No one will come in,” Hinata said awkwardly. “And it’s not like we have any other options.”

Komaeda sent him a side-eye. “Do you depraved Reserve Course leeches actually *like* getting naked in public?”

“Huh? N-no!” Hinata scowled, his blush getting deeper. “Shut up, okay? One more word and you don’t get your clothes washed.”

Komaeda bit his lip, cheeks pink. “Fine,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt, “if Hinata *insists*-”

“Holy *shit*, dude!” Hinata exclaimed, holding up his hands in surrender. “Turn around first, or something!”

“Oh.” Komaeda quickly turned his back to Hinata before continuing to unbutton his shirt. He’d just started to shrug it off his shoulders when Hinata reminded himself to *turn the fuck around*.

He made quick work of his own shirt, fumbling with the buttons and tossing it carelessly to the floor. Next, he pulled his wallet and phone from his pockets before setting them on a small bench facing the machines. He started on his belt, but his mind kept drifting back to the boy behind him. Komaeda’s chest was just as pale as the rest of his body. His stupid messy hair almost reached the tops of his shoulders. He had nice collarbones.

Hinata’s eyes went wide. *They were... just observations*, he rationalized. That was all. Nevertheless, he quickly shook himself off that train of thought, whatever the hell it was leading to. He finally stepped out of his pants, which left him wearing just his boxers, and when he turned back around, he found himself nose-to-nose with Komaeda.

Both of them jolted back immediately. Komaeda was holding his folded clothes in one hand, his wallet in the other, and Hinata watched as he dropped a few coins into the machine. Hinata scrambled to pick up his own clothes from the floor before tossing them into the washing machine with Komaeda’s. Komaeda shut the machine door, added a ridiculous amount of detergent, and tapped a few buttons.

“Let’s hope my bad luck doesn’t dye your clothes pink.”

“Wash it on cold, then,” Hinata said back. (Besides, he thought he actually looked pretty good in pink.)

“That’s... actually not a terrible idea.” Komaeda sounded a bit pained to admit it.

Hinata rolled his eyes. “Miracles happen every day. Now turn on the washing machine.”

Komaeda tapped another button, and the machine whirled to life. Which was great, except for the fact that Hinata was now standing in a room, half-naked and completely unoccupied, with another guy who was *also* half-naked and unoccupied. And that meant that what Hinata was currently doing was staring at Komaeda, and it meant that Komaeda was staring right back at him.

Komaeda was skinny, even more than Hinata had imagined. His legs were really long. He was wearing plaid boxers, which was actually kind of cute, and *fuck*, Hinata was dangerously close to leaving observation territory and heading into something else entirely.

His one comfort was that at least Komaeda looked as embarrassed as he felt, and he was staring, too. Komaeda’s breath sounded fast, and he was biting his lip, and his face had gone completely pink. When Hinata finally met his eyes, they both froze in place. *This was probably equally terrible for the both of them*, Hinata thought. Being alone in this room together was seriously fucking with his head. This whole trip was.

He crossed his arms over his chest and sat down on the bench, effectively breaking whatever spell had come over them. He grabbed for his phone, sliding it open and selecting whatever mind-numbing game he could tap on first. After he’d lost his fifth round of *Snake*, though, he snuck a glance at Komaeda. He was perched on top of the empty washing machine in the corner, crossing his legs, looking down, and fiddling with his hands. Hinata turned back to his phone, and they both continued to very pointedly not acknowledge the other’s existence.

Hinata didn’t know how long it had been when the washing machine let out a small jingling sound. Komaeda quickly hopped off his perch and opened the door, pulling out their now-clean clothes before standing back up.

“Excuse me,” he said, kicking slightly at Hinata’s leg. Hinata looked down, realizing he was in the way, and jumped to his feet to let Komaeda past.

Except for now Hinata was seeing Komaeda's bad luck in action once again, because even with that, there was barely enough space for Komaeda to fit through. That didn’t stop him, though; Komaeda pressed himself back against the machines and shuffled through, his whole body brushing past Hinata’s. He paused for half a second, green eyes meeting hazel. Hinata's face was just inches from Komaeda's, and they were both breathing heavily, chests rising and falling with intention. He could feel Komaeda's heart beating through his chest.

And just like that, it was over. Komaeda looked down and continued past quickly, immediately looking away and busying himself with the dryer. Hinata, however, was left leaning against the wall, trying to swallow over the lump in his throat.

He heard the distant sound of the dryer spinning to life before Komaeda stood up, stumbling just a little bit before righting himself. "I'm going to go shower," announced Komaeda loudly before walking briskly out of the room.

Probably disgusted to have to get that close to a Reserve student, Hinata surmised with a scowl. He braced himself against the wall, taking a few deep breaths before returning to his seat.

When he got back to the room, clothes piled in his arms, Komaeda was still in the shower. Hinata set his clothes on the corner of the bed; not quite folded, but not nearly as haphazard as if they'd been his own.

He wasn't quite sure what to do next, so he leaned on the opposite edge of the bed, falling onto his back and letting out a breath. The night air was warm, disturbed only by the lazy breeze of the fan carding through his hair. When he listened closely, he could hear the homesick chime of cicadas from the other side of the screen door. Slowly, he stood up, placing his socked feet evenly on the wooden floor and walking over to the doorway. He slid back the screen and sat down on the porch, letting his legs dangle off the edge. From here, he could see the whole forest under the light of a pale crescent moon. Pinpricks of light dotted the dark blue horizon, and Hinata didn't think he'd ever seen this many stars before. He'd spent his whole life in Tokyo, where even on clear nights, light pollution still obscured half the sky. There were so many stars he'd never even seen. It seemed weird that he could have missed out on entire galaxies so easily.

He'd been there for a while before heard the screen door open behind him. Turning back, he saw Komaeda standing hesitantly in the doorway. The other boy's still-damp hair was sticking up at odd angles, his pale skin was flushed from the shower, and he was only wearing his newly clean sweater and uniform pants. His fingers were curled around the door handle, and his eyes were flitting about nervously, refusing to look directly at Hinata.

"You can come outside, y'know," Hinata said. "If you want."

Komaeda's gaze shot towards him. "You- really? You wouldn't mind?"

Hinata shrugged sharply. "Well, it's better than you just awkwardly standing behind me."

With a wordless nod, Komaeda slowly approached the edge of the porch and sat down as far away from Hinata as was possible (which actually wasn't very far at all, given the confines of the regrettably small porch.)

"...Do you like watching the stars?" Komaeda asked, hesitation evident in his voice.

"I guess," Hinata replied stiffly.

"Have you ever heard of cosmic insignificance?" When Hinata shook his head, Komaeda continued. "The universe that surrounds us is vast, and we are so very small. When we reflect on the vastness of the universe, our humdrum cosmic location, and the inevitable future demise of humanity, our lives can seem utterly insignificant."

“Well, yeah,” Hinata said, “but I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

“You... don’t?”

“It’s kinda reassuring, in a weird way. When I look at the sky, and I see how huge it is, I know that the stars up there don’t care who I am or what I do. If I’m insignificant in the universe, then I’m allowed to exist on my own terms.”

“Huh.” Komaeda looked at him curiously. “Perhaps you’re more interesting than I gave you credit for, Hinata.”

“I suppose that’s your version of a compliment.”

“Yes, well.” The edges of Komaeda’s mouth twitched up. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

Hinata bit back a smile. “Oh, I wouldn’t *dare*.” He laid down on the deck completely, arms folded behind his head.

After a moment of uncertainty, Komaeda laid down next to him and looked back up at the sky. “You can see so many more stars out here, right?”

Hinata nodded. “I’ve always lived in the middle of the city, so I don’t get to see stuff like this very often.”

“It’s beautiful,” Komaeda said softly.

“Yeah.”

Komaeda’s gaze flicked to Hinata for a moment, stilted and halfway apologetic. “Ah, sorry. I must be bothering you.”

“You’re not, actually,” Hinata promised. He could have stopped there, but he realized that this was one of the few positive conversations he and Komaeda had ever had. It almost felt like he was talking to a *friend*, the way it had when they’d first met, and he wasn’t ready to give that up quite yet. “Do you know any constellations?”

Komaeda seemed surprised by Hinata’s interest, but he nodded eagerly and launched into some long explanation about the stars and their patterns. Hinata was surprised that he didn’t even have to feign interest in what Komaeda was saying - he genuinely wanted to listen.

“Shooting star!” Komaeda said suddenly. He was pointing at the sky. Hinata was looking at his hand. “Make a wish.”

Hinata raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that stuff for kids?”

“Haha, I guess so.”

“Well, whatever.” Hinata watched the sky and thought of a wish to make, finally settling on, *I wish that this trip won’t end in some horrible disaster*. “Okay, done. What was yours?”

“You can’t say it out loud.” Komaeda looked up at the stars with a small smile. “It won’t come true unless it’s a secret.”

Hinata tilted his head to glance at him. There were stars in Komaeda’s gray-green eyes, and he was looking at the sky with the most genuine expression Hinata ever seen on his face. Hinata decided that out here, in the moonlight, Komaeda didn’t really seem so terrible at all.

“Though, if I had to guess, you probably wished to join the Main Course, right?” Komaeda asked. “Kind of tragic, isn’t it? To want something that will never actually happen.”

And oh, right, *that’s* why he and Komaeda didn’t get along. Whenever Hinata started thinking he and Komaeda might be able to be friends after all, Komaeda would ruin it.

It had been nice while it lasted, though.

With a sigh of exasperation, Hinata pushed himself up onto his hands. “And, moment over,” he announced before standing up and pulling open the screen door. “We should go to sleep. We’re going to have to wake up early tomorrow if we want to end this trip as quickly as possible.”

“...Of course.” Komaeda slowly followed behind him. “And, um. You really wouldn’t be disgusted by sharing a bed again? Even after what happened this morning?”

Hinata shrugged. “I mean, it was embarrassing, but whatever. Just don’t do it again.”

“*You* did that.”

“Shut up.” Hinata’s face flushed red. “I’m gonna go shower.” He turned away, but before he could go:

“A-and you’re *sure* you don’t want me to sleep outside-”

“I’m sure,” he sighed, closing the bathroom door behind him.

By the time Hinata got back, Komaeda was already fast asleep. He’d still felt the need to place himself at the very edge of the bed, which was half-amusing and half-insulting. Hinata nudged him towards the middle before taking his own place on the other side and turning off the lamp. He rolled to his side, ready to fall asleep immediately, when he found himself looking right at Komaeda.

Komaeda looked deceptively calm when he was asleep, Hinata thought - all traces of his usual strange demeanor had been wiped away entirely, leaving behind a boy who seemed almost peaceful. It was odd to see him with his guard completely down: White hair falling into his face, dark eyelashes casting shadows across his cheeks. With the golden moonlight from outside, Komaeda looked close to angelic.

With a low laugh, Hinata rolled back to his own side of the bed and closed his eyes. After all, he knew Komaeda far too well for thoughts like that.

day 3

Chapter Summary

Things go wrong, as usual.

Chapter Notes

strap in for a long chapter tonight fellas!! (also, TW for a brief description of a panic attack about 2/3 of the way through!!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Oh, shit.

It happened again.

Hinata woke up much as he had the previous morning; Komaeda clinging to his chest, one arm wrapped tightly around Komaeda's waist, and Komaeda's legs entwined with his. He felt warm all over, as if every part of him was touching some part of Komaeda.

It wasn't nearly as startling as yesterday (which was a worrying enough thought on its own, actually), but it *was* equally humiliating. He felt heat rise to his face as he shifted a bit, debating whether to push away Komaeda to wake him up or try to extract himself from the bed before Komaeda noticed their situation - but then he froze.

Because the thing was, Hinata was observant. He could pick up on things other people didn't notice, and he really was smart, despite how often his friends still teased him about that one time he'd forgotten how many sides an octagon had. And with the clues in front of him right now, Hinata was completely sure of one thing: Komaeda was *already awake*.

It was obvious, really; Komaeda's breathing was far too unsteady, his body far too stiff to belong to someone sleeping. But the odd thing was, he hadn't moved away from Hinata at all - they were just as close as they had been the last morning, and that brought one question to the front of Hinata's mind.

"...Huh?" he grumbled, his voice still rough from sleep.

Komaeda's eyes blinked open quickly, a poor imitation of someone who had just woken up. He pushed himself out of Hinata's arms immediately, propping himself up on the other side of the bed. "Really, Hinata, *again?*" His voice was condescending as ever, but his hands were

twitchy, and he was refusing to make eye contact. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were doing this on purpose.”

Hinata paused, then, because *what*. He knew Komaeda had been awake. He couldn’t have been wrong about that, so why was Komaeda trying to pin their situation on him?

Maybe this had been Komaeda’s plan all along - he’d been waiting for Hinata to wake up just so he could purposefully humiliate him about their position. Perhaps that was assuming too much, though. Komaeda could have just been embarrassed, unsure how to avoid the awkwardness of yesterday. Maybe Hinata’s arm has kept him trapped there, and *that* sure was a mortifying thought.

After all, It’s not like Komaeda would ever actually want to be close to him. He didn’t even like Hinata, so he had no reason to stay. Between the world’s most awkward high-five and how quickly Komaeda had fled the laundry room last night, Hinata had gotten the pretty clear message that Komaeda didn’t want to get near the ‘*Reserve Course trash*.’

Maybe Komaeda was just an asshole. He *was*, and Hinata wasn’t sure why he had to try so hard to convince himself of that these days. It was like ever since they’d gotten stuck with each other, some switch had gone off in Hinata’s mind that had made him start seeing more to Komaeda. He was incredibly clever. He cared a lot about things. He was a real person, underneath everything. But that only made it worse, really, because now Hinata knew there was something - someone - he was missing out on.

He wished he could hate him. He wished he didn’t care. It would make everything a whole lot easier.

“Well? Any response, Reserve Course?” Komaeda lilted, breaking Hinata from his thoughts.

“Sure.” Without warning, Hinata picked up his pillow and lobbed it at Komaeda. It hit him square in the face, knocking him back slightly, and Hinata grinned.

Komaeda scowled and let out an affronted huff as the pillow landed in his lap, unruly hair all mussed up around his face. “Clingy *and* childish? This is a new low for you, Hinata.”

“At least I’m not the guy who got taken down by a pillow.” Hinata rolled off the bed, stretching out his arms as he stood up.

“That was a lucky hit.” Komaeda narrowed his eyes, clearly miffed.

Hinata raised his eyebrows. “I thought *you* were supposed to be the lucky one here,” he called over his shoulder as he started towards the bathroom.

“You *know* that’s not how it works.” Komaeda raised the pillow at him threateningly. “Or do I have to explain it in simpler terms for someone of your intellect?”

“I’ll pass, thanks.” He turned around to lean against the bathroom doorway, feeling particularly vengeful. “Oh, and Komaeda?”

“Hm?”

“I know you weren’t actually asleep.”

Komaeda’s whole face went pink, and Hinata couldn’t stop himself from laughing at the sight. That time Komaeda really did throw the pillow at him, but Hinata shut the bathroom door just before it hit.

They’d been driving for maybe two hours when the car broke down.

Logically, Hinata had been expecting the old piece of junk to sputter out at any minute, but it still felt like a punch to the gut when it did. He and Komaeda were now stuck on the turnoff of some small country road, surrounded by large fields of grass and a clear blue sky. They had to be miles from any sort of civilization - and, Hinata realized dismally as he opened his phone, miles away from any cell towers.

He slumped forwards and banged his forehead against the steering wheel in frustration. “I’m starting to think this car might have been more trouble than it’s worth,” he mumbled, dejected.

“Well, I knew something was going to go wrong eventually,” said Komaeda from the passenger seat. “At least there’s no one trying to stab us again, right?” He quickly glanced out the window, and, seeing no potential murderers, turned back. “Yeah. No stabbers.”

“You really had to *check*?”

They both got out of the car to look at the engine. There was a concerning amount of smoke pouring from under the hood, which was already dented and scratched in several places. Hinata supposed that, really, he’d gotten what he paid for - nothing.

“...Alright,” he muttered, slinging his backpack over one shoulder. “We can think of a plan here. Uh, I’ll go walk around until my phone gets service, then call Soda to figure out how to fix the car. You stay here and try to get it started with with some... luck... thing.”

Komaeda turned towards him, mildly amused. “A luck thing. Of course.”

“Just-” he tossed up his hands. “You know what I mean.”

Hinata had been walking down the side of the road for a while when his phone finally got a single, precious bar of service. It was fading in and out, so he climbed up onto a small stone fence on the edge of the road, holding his phone up in the air. The bar finally seemed steady, so he opened up his contacts and called Soda, turning on speaker phone and waiting for his friend to pick up.

“Hey, soul bro!” Soda’s voice crackled to life on the other line. “You coming back soon?”

“Not... quite.” Hinata wobbled on the fence, grimacing. “I need your help again, buddy.”

“You better not ask for anything else illegal!”

“That was *one time*. ”

"Still, leaves an impression, bro!" said Soda. "Can't have people thinking I associate myself with that kinda lifestyle, ya know?"

Hinata stared down Soda's contact photo, which showed him in full pink-haired, sharp-toothed glory. "...Have you taken a look in the mirror recently?"

"Hey!" Soda yelped, offended. "Oi, Nidai! C'mere! Hinata's insultin' my sexy vibe!"

"It's not very manly to diss a friend's vibe, Hinata!" Nidai's voice boomed from the other line.

"...My bad."

"Gahaha, it's alright! Live and learn!" Nidai laughed. "How's your road trip going, by the way?"

Hinata paused to adjust his balance on the fence. "That's what I was calling about, actually. Our car just broke down in the middle of nowhere, and I need some help," he explained. "Also, again, let me clarify - *not a road trip*."

"Woah, wait, your car really just broke down out of nowhere?" Soda let out a low whistle. "Well, that's what ya get for trusting in shoddy workmanship. If I'd been there to fix it, this never woulda happened."

"Yes, Soda," Hinata sighed. "That's why I called you."

"Have you tried pushing it?" Nidai asked, leaning in closer to the phone.

"Pushing the car? Like, all the way back to Tokyo?" Hinata rolled his eyes on instinct, glad the other boys couldn't see him. "Somehow, the thought never really crossed my mind."

"Your lack of spirit is *disappointing*!" Nidai roared.

"Nah, man, Hinata's right," interjected Soda. "Can you imagine Komaeda pushing a car? The guy probably weighs, like, 90 pounds soaking wet. He's tiny."

"He's taller than you," said Hinata, mostly just on impulse.

Soda huffed on the other line. "There you go again, dissing my vibe!"

"Okay, just - what do I do here, dude?" Hinata asked desperately. "And please don't tell me to build a car robot again."

"I got you here, bro." From the other end of the phone, Hinata could hear Soda crack his knuckles. "This is my zone. You ready? You might wanna write this shit down, man. It's gonna be mind-blowing, I tell ya."

Hinata didn't end up writing it down, but he kept repeating Soda's instructions over and over again in his head as he walked back towards the car. As long as Komaeda still had his multi-

tool, it would actually be pretty easy - turned out Soda's talent really had come in handy after all.

Eventually, Hinata made it back to where he'd started, spotting the distant figure of Komaeda in one of the fields. He ran up towards him, his breathing slightly rushed as he looked up to face him. "Alright, I talked to Soda, he said to-" Hinata stopped mid-sentence when he glanced at the road - something had clearly gone very, very wrong after he'd left. He took a deep breath and whirled around to his side. "Hey, Komaeda. Why is the car on *fire*?"

"Oh, is it?" Komaeda looked down, feigning innocence as he scuffed at the dirt with his shoe. "I hadn't noticed."

"You *hadn't noticed*," Hinata repeated, dumbfounded, as he watched the flames spread across the car.

"Nope!"

Hinata let out a deep breath, anxiety rising up in his gut. "Shit, okay, is this your- I dunno, part of your luck cycle?"

"Ah, no. This is actually completely on purpose!" Komaeda chimed, then frowned. "You're going to want to cover your ears, Hinata."

"*What?*" he asked incredulously. "No! I'm going to try and put out the fire!"

"I *really* wouldn't recommend that!" Komaeda replied, voice rising as Hinata started walking across the field towards the car.

He didn't make it far, though, given that he was tackled down to the grass by Komaeda after he'd barely taken a step forward. Hinata went weightless for half a second, then felt a dull thud as his back hit the ground. His hands reflexively gripped Komaeda's thin waist to stop the other boy from crashing into him, which left Komaeda arched over him, hands pressed down on his chest. He practically pinning Hinata to the ground, long legs boxing him in on either side of his hips. Momentarily dazed, Hinata stared up at Komaeda, who was looking back down at him with mirrored intensity, all wide green eyes and labored breath. Hinata couldn't decide if he wanted to kill him or kiss him.

And fuck, he must have hit his head pretty hard, because who the hell would think something like that?

Hinata desperately shook himself back to reality. He had *several* questions he wanted to ask Komaeda, but before he could start to say anything, he was cut off by a sudden booming explosion from the direction of the car.

For a moment, Hinata froze - then jolted back to reality, ears ringing, head pounding, heart racing. Still disoriented, he found it in himself to look at his surroundings, and quick glance to his left informed Hinata that the car had, in fact, exploded. Stunned, he looked back up at Komaeda. He was still pinning Hinata to the ground, his hair was flying in the wake of the

blast, and his eyes were gleaming with a strange, intense fanaticism. Hinata knew he should be afraid, but he found the sight oddly fascinating.

Woah. Komaeda saved me from that explosion, he thought distantly.

His next realization, however, was much more jarring: *Komaeda blew up the car*.

“Komaeda,” he said weakly, still breathless from the fall. “What the *fuck*?”

“Isn’t destruction for the sake of hope beautiful, Hinata?” Komaeda wheezed from above him. “What better way to offset the despair of the car breaking down than by destroying that despair at its very source!”

“*Komaeda*,” he echoed, utterly distraught.

“Besides, I figured someone would see the explosion and come help us.”

Hinata scowled up at him furiously. “That someone is probably going to be the police. Who are going to arrest us. For *crimes*.”

“Oh.” Komaeda frowned, then shrugged. “Haha, I guess so!”

“Oh, fuck,” Hinata hissed. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Komaeda paused. “Do you want a list, or-”

Hinata stared at him, mildly horrified. “No, I don’t want a list.” He thumped his head back against the ground, staring up at the sky and wondering how the fuck he got himself into this situation. Laying on a field. Watching his hotwired car burn to ash. Nagito Komaeda still perched on his lap, which, *huh*.

“Get off,” he muttered, pushing himself up on his hands. Komaeda, as if just realizing where he still was, quickly jumped to his feet. Hinata followed him up, the world still spinning a bit under his feet. He wobbled for a bit before righting himself. “We gotta get out of here before someone finds us,” he said, his voice more empty and resigned than he’d ever heard it sound before.

They trudged up the road for a few miles before Hinata let them slow down - he needed to put a safe distance between them and what *used to be* their car. Komaeda had tried to speak once or twice, but Hinata had silenced him with a withering glare each time.

They’d kept walking along the side of the street, trying to flag down a car to give them a ride. Both had been completely unsuccessful so far, as the cars were few and far between, but Hinata was too stubborn to quit yet.

At this point, though, he was starting to get desperate. He saw a minivan approaching, and he jumped at the opportunity, quickly sticking out his thumb. The van, however, sped right past him, not sparing him a second glance.

He hung his head miserably as he continued walking along the side of the road. "...They didn't stop," he muttered, mostly to himself.

"Typical Reserve Course," Komaeda called from behind him, apparently taking that as a conversation opener. "Can you do *anything* right?" he said, his voice like claws sinking into Hinata's skin.

Hinata finally stopped walking, standing dead in his tracks. He tightened his hands into fists and let out a long, tired breath, staring blankly ahead. "Y'know, Komaeda, I like to think that I'm a good person," he started, voice strained. "And I've tried my best to put up with all of the shit you give me about being in the Reserve Course. But I'm so tired of this. I really, really am. Now you've destroyed our only way back home, and you've gotten us stranded here, and I don't know *why*!"

He heard Komaeda hesitate behind him, then ask, "Why *what*, Hinata?"

Hinata finally turned around and threw his hands in the air. "Why do you hate me so much? What did I *do*?" he demanded, cursing the hurt that seeped into his voice.

Komaeda's eyes went wide. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and just continued to stare at Hinata. He was almost trembling, and he bit his lip before he spoke. "...I don't hate you," he said eventually. His voice was low and shaky, as if he was struggling to even get the words out.

Hinata's scowl deepened. "Really, Komaeda? Because that's sure what it feels like from here."

"I wish I did hate you." Komaeda was looking down, frustrated and a bit sad. "I wish I could. I tried *make* myself hate you by pretending you were just some talentless Reserve Course deadweight, but even that didn't work!"

"So you're trying to put me on your level? Is that it?" Hinata hated how his voice came out halted and unsteady instead of angry like he wanted. "You think we're both talentless *'stepping stones for hope,'* or whatever, and you want to say we're the same because we both feel talentless. You can say that all you want, but at least I'm not miserable about it!"

"Are you sure about that, Hinata?" Komaeda taunted. "You don't want to admit it, but you care about talent just as much as I do."

"Maybe we're both miserable, then!" he exclaimed. "But you shouldn't be! Because the truth is, you actually *have* a talent. That's the one thing I've always wanted. Do you have any idea what I would do to be like you?"

"Do you have any idea what I would do to be like *you*?" Komaeda demanded, then froze - that clearly wasn't what he'd wanted to say. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights, stunned by his own admission.

For his part, Hinata was equally confused. That hadn't been at all what he was expecting from the other boy. "...What the hell does *that* mean?" he asked, scowling.

Komaeda hesitated before speaking, as if he wasn't sure he could actually get the words out. "...Well, your life is simple. Average. Boring."

Hinata narrowed his eyes at him. "I'm waiting for the part where this gets nicer."

Komaeda shook his head frantically. "But that's just it! My luck has made my life a constant cycle of chaos and destruction! It's the only thing I'm good for, but it's also the thing that's destroyed my life. Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I was like you. I might have a family. I might have friends. I might-" He hesitated. "I- I might not be alone."

Hinata paused. "You're... jealous of me?"

"Yes!" he said, as if Hinata was finally getting it. "You're supposed to be some talentless nobody, right? Then how can you do things that I can't? You're friends with my whole class! I unnerve them, but it's like just being around you makes people feel calmer. And if I'd been left behind here without you, I wouldn't have gotten anywhere on this trip. You're impossible, Hinata! Your very existence goes against everything I believe, and if I don't have my beliefs, then I- I have nothing." His voice was wavering. "You aren't supposed to mean something to me, but you *do*, and I don't understand it!" Komaeda said, a bit desperate. "Why do I still care about you?"

"Well, I don't hate you, either!" Hinata wasn't really sure why he was still yelling. "That's why it sucks so much when all you do is talk about the stupid Reserve Course! We've spent so much time together, and there's been moments where I thought we could actually be, y'know. Friends. And I'll always start thinking, *maybe this time will be different. It has to mean something this time*. But every single time, you turn around and call me a dumbass shit-for-brains Reserve Course student again!"

"Ah, I never used those exact words."

Hinata sighed. "Paraphrasing, Komaeda."

"...I shouldn't have been so cruel to you," Komaeda said quietly. "I'm sorry. I suppose, even though you weren't born with talent... you're relentless, Hinata. You don't give up. You're the most stubborn person I've ever met. That's something I can admire. It's- it's something I can *understand*."

"Understand?"

"We both want to be more than we are. We both want to *mean* something. To other people, to the world. Even to ourselves," Komaeda said.

They stared at each other for a moment, and it felt like Hinata had been caught in the wake of an explosion all over again. Komaeda's position mimicked his own, he noticed; fists clenched, leaning forwards, chest rising and falling unevenly. There was this desperate sort of conviction burning in Komaeda's eyes, the same kind Hinata saw every time he looked in the mirror, stubborn and longing and holding on for dear life.

Komaeda's lips parted slightly before closing again, as if he was figuring out what to say next. Before he could get it out, though, he was cut off by the blaring sound of a car horn.

In an instant, they both jumped back, whatever spell had come over them broken. Hinata looked to his side to see that a beat-up blue sedan had pulled up next to them and was now trying to get their attention. He gave an awkward wave, and the window rolled down to reveal a pretty light-haired woman with a cigarette hanging from her lips.

"Need a ride?" she asked, her voice a casual drawl.

"We really do," Hinata answered desperately. He was willing to accept almost any help at this point, and this woman seemed... fairly trustworthy. At the very least, according to Komaeda's logic, it would be almost impossible for any *more* bad luck to happen to them that day.

"Thanks."

"Go ahead and hop in the back. The passenger seat's full of random shit." She tilted her head towards the backseat.

Hinata went in first. One of the end seats was stacked with luggage, so he folded himself into the middle seat and placed his backpack at his feet. Komaeda slid in next to him, their legs brushing up against each other in such a small space. They'd been in closer proximity than usual today, for a lot of different reasons. Hinata was starting to think that maybe Komaeda didn't dislike the contact as much as he'd originally assumed.

"I'm Hinata, by the way." He leaned forwards, figuring it would only be polite to introduce himself. "And this is my- my, um." He hesitated. "My... Komaeda." Immediately, Hinata wanted to smack himself for how that came out.

"Hinata and his Komaeda, huh?" she said. Hinata felt himself blush as she shot them an exaggerated wink. "The name's Hiroko Hagakure. Nice to meet ya."

"You, too."

Hiroko slammed her foot down on the gas pedal, and the car shot back onto the road. "So what the hell are you two boys doing out here alone?" she called over her shoulder.

"We got left behind on a class trip," Komaeda explained. "So unlucky, right?"

Hiroko snorted. "I'll say. What kind of a shitty school would even do something like that?"

"Hope's Peak, apparently," Hinata answered.

He snuck a nervous glance Komaeda in anticipation of the boy's comment. He feared Komaeda would attempt to point out that Hinata was just a Reserve Course student - but instead, he just nodded in agreement, which. *Huh.*

"Hope's Peak, huh?" Hiroko peered back at them for a second before swerving slightly and returning her attention to the road. "Small world! That's where my son goes."

"What, really?" asked Hinata.

Hiroko nodded eagerly. "He's probably a little older than you two. I'm very proud of him - he's a very successful boy."

"Ah, what's his talent?" Komaeda straightened up in his seat, suddenly interested. "I bet his hope shines brightly!" he added eagerly.

"He's the Ultimate Clairvoyant! Pretty cool, right?" Hiroko cooed, motherly pride clear in her voice.

Hinata watched as Komaeda's hopeful expression instantly fell. "That's the guy who tried to sell my *organs*," he whispered despondently.

Hinata had to stifle his laugh. "Dude, what the fuck," he whispered back.

Komaeda shot him a half-pained, half-confused look, like *yeah, I don't really get it either*.

"-and I love the kid, but his troubles with money are gonna drive me crazy, I swear," grumbled Hiroko. While Hinata had been distracted, apparently their driver had been going on her own tirade about her son. "Where are you guys headed, anyways?"

Hinata looked up. "Hakodate is the goal, but we'll take anywhere south of here."

"Nah, Hakodate's fine. I'm headed someplace near there myself - I've gotta buy some new fancy crystal ball for my son, and this little shop there is the only place that stocks 'em."

"...Right." Hinata shifted forwards. "D'you the best way back to the main island?"

"There's a ferry across the strait that leaves fuck-early in the morning. I'm not usually an early bird, but I used to be a *good friend* of the captain, if you get my drift-" Suddenly, Hiroko slammed her hand on the horn as a car merged in front of her. "Hey, turn your goddamn blinker on, asshole!"

Hinata zoned out for the rest of the car ride, arms crossed and head tilted down. It had only just gotten dark out and this had already been one of the longest days of his life. He was half-asleep by the time he felt the car skid to a stop, and he yawned, blinking his bleary eyes open.

"Here's your stop, boys," announced Hiroko from the driver's seat.

Hinata pushed himself up and looked out the window; they'd ended up parked in front of an inn, mountains visible in the distance. Komaeda was already stepping out of the car, and Hinata followed behind him, stumbling a bit when his feet hit the ground.

Hiroko leaned out of the window, shooting them a wide grin. "You two boys care of yourselves, okay?"

"Will do!" chimed Komaeda with a polite smile. "Thank you again for the ride. We are truly lucky to have received your benevolence."

“Any time,” she drawled, leaning back into her seat. “And make sure you tell my no-good son to pay off his debts to the yakuza!” With that, Hiroko sped away, the wheels of her sedan screeching against the asphalt.

Everything around Hinata felt slightly off-center as he stepped into the inn. His brain was almost on auto-pilot as he spoke to the receptionist, and he didn’t even remember which room he’d booked, but he must have gotten there somehow, because he’d ended up staring blankly at the tiled bathroom wall. Komaeda had left for - something. Water, maybe, but even that was just a guess. Hinata could feel the world swaying beneath his feet, and his vision was getting blurry, and his chest felt tight. It was getting harder to breathe, and he was starting to panic. He climbed into the bathtub and sat down, hugging his knees to his chest and pressing his head down against them. He was rocking slightly, and his lungs felt like they were going to burst, and-

“Hey!” That was- that was Komaeda’s voice, and there were footsteps coming towards him, echoing off the white tile floor. “Hinata, are you okay?”

“Perfectly fucking fine,” Hinata managed to get out through wheezy, body-shaking breaths. He could barely recognize his own broken voice.

Komaeda paused, waited, then kneeled in front of the tub. “...It’s okay, Hinata. It’s okay. Just close your eyes.”

Despite himself, Hinata complied, shutting out his blurry vision.

“Now take a deep breath, okay? In and out, slowly. Feel the air fill your chest, regulate your breathing, just like that.”

Hinata tried to follow along. It took a few tries, but after a couple minutes, his breathing was back to a normal, if shaky, pace. He finally looked up and opened his eyes, and he was met with Komaeda staring back at him, concern written across his expression.

“...Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

“I’m fine now.” Hinata’s voice still sounded a bit choked up, but it was much better than before. He sat up slightly, propping his elbows on the back edge of the tub. “...Thanks. That was... actually pretty helpful.”

“You really don’t have to thank me,” Komaeda replied, then frowned. “Are you going to get out of the bathtub now?”

Hinata leaned back. “Not yet.”

Komaeda tilted his head in consideration, bit his lip, then stepped into the tub. Hinata slid to the far end to make room for him to sit down. He could only move so far, though; their elbows were still touching, thighs still pressed together. That made his chest feel tight for a whole different reason, one that he’d rather not think about.

Komaeda's gaze flickered towards him. "...Do you want to talk about it?" he asked, then froze, an expression of regret crossing over his face. "Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to assume that you'd ever want to confide in *me*."

"It's... fine. It might actually help to sort it out with someone else." Hinata shrugged and looked up at the ceiling. "No matter who they are."

He could hear Komaeda shift next to him before asking, "That was a panic attack, right?"

"Yeah," Hinata said carefully. "I got them a lot back in first year, but... not so much anymore. I usually know how to stop them now, but sometimes I just get... overwhelmed, I guess."

Komaeda nodded. "I understand. Even when you think you're going to be able to deal with them, sometimes you just lose control."

"...You have panic attacks too?" Hinata asked.

"Well, I used to get them all the time after my parents died. Had to find a way to deal with them pretty quickly after that."

Hinata turned to him, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry. I- I didn't know."

Komaeda let out a sound that sounded almost like a laugh. "Of course you didn't know. I didn't tell you," he said. "And you don't have to apologize - especially not to someone like me." He tilted his head down to stare at the bottom of bathtub. "It's not like you did it. Besides, it was years ago."

"I'm still sorry."

"*I'm* the one who should be sorry," said Komaeda. "After all, I'm the one who killed them."

Hinata jolted back, knocking his head against the tile. "You - *what?*"

"Oh, no. Hm. I probably could have phrased that better." Komaeda trailed a shaky finger across the bathtub floor. "It's my luck that killed them, really. It happened back in elementary school. I'd just gone on vacation with my family, and we'd boarded an airplane back home. But surprise, surprise! After we boarded, the plane was hijacked! But then, out of nowhere, this tiny meteorite fell at exactly the right time - it struck the hijacker and prevented any further problems." His voice was getting smaller and smaller. "But... the meteorite also hit my parents, and they died instantly. You might think that's a terrible act of bad luck - but in the end, I obtained my freedom and an immense inheritance. So maybe it was actually good luck after all."

...Well, that explained why Komaeda hadn't wanted to catch a plane back to Tokyo. Hinata stared at the other boy, sympathy sending a pang through his chest. That... definitely explained a lot about Komaeda. Hinata thought that if he'd grown up like that, he had no idea how he might have turned out.

"Now I'm *really* sorry," he said. "No one should have to go through that."

“Ah, well. Things like this have happened so many times, I’ve begun to believe it’s what I deserve. I invite tragedy simply by existing.” Komaeda idly tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. “This is just how my life goes, so there’s really no reason to pity me.”

“It’s not pity,” Hinata urged. “I just- I don’t want you to feel like you deserved all those things that happened to you. I mean, you- it’s not your fault. You know that, right?”

When he finally looked up, Komaeda was staring at him, wide-eyed.

“...Komaeda?”

“I was only kidding anyways!” Komaeda exclaimed suddenly, his voice sounding tight and high-strung in a way it hadn’t before. “That’s all- It’s not true. I was making it up, you see? It’s just something I read in a book once.”

Hinata felt his stomach drop, incredibly betrayed. Of course Komaeda was fucking with him again, of course it didn’t mean anything - *except*. Komaeda’s hands were shaking. He wouldn’t have been able to feel it if they hadn’t been sitting so close, but they were definitely shaking.

“Yeah, no. Bullshit.”

Komaeda blinked. “I- what?”

Hinata scowled. “Bullshit, Komaeda. I may not have an actual talent, but I’m pretty damn good at knowing when people are lying.”

Komaeda looked down, sighed, then looked back up at Hinata. “Well,” he said quietly, “for both of our sakes, I think it’s better if you pretend I never told you this.”

Hinata wanted to protest, but thought the better of it. He bit his lip and nodded.

For a moment, neither one of them spoke. Hinata felt cool tile through the thin fabric of his shirt as drummed his fingers against the edge of the tub. He shifted slightly, turning to look at Komaeda.

“...So you’re rich, huh?”

“You could say that,” replied Komaeda.

“Explains why you’ve been paying for all our hotel rooms.”

“Yes, well.” He glanced at Hinata, a small, barely-there smile on his lips. “I do what I can to help the less fortunate.”

Hinata snorted and elbowed him softly in the ribs. “Shut up.”

In response, Komaeda knocked his knee against Hinata’s. “Oh, sure. Anything for Hinata.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Hinata rolled his eyes and knocked Komaeda back.

Komaeda tilted sideways, grabbing onto the faucet for support. Unfortunately for both of them, he must have grabbed the handle, because Hinata suddenly found himself drenched in cold water. Sputtering out a laugh, he squinted up to see the shower raining down on both of them. Komaeda quickly turned the handle back, frowning as he wiped water from his eyes before sending Hinata an apologetic look.

“I’m so sorry, Hinata! Not only have you been forced to spend time with trash like me and hear about my pathetic life, but you’ve also had to experience my terrible luck,” he said quickly.

“It’s... fine. I probably needed a shower, anyways.” He dragged a hand across his face and knocked his head back against the wall. “I dunno what we’re supposed to do now, though.”

“...There’s an onsen out back?” suggested Komaeda hesitantly. “I could see it from the lobby. We can go there while our clothes dry. Ah, if you want, I mean. You don’t have to say yes.”

“Yeah. That works.”

It was pretty late, so they were the only two out there. The water went up to Hinata’s shoulders, comforting and warm, a nice contrast to the cooler northern air around him. He could see mountains in the distance and trees reaching up into the night sky, far beyond the twinkling lights of the city. The only sounds were the hum of cicadas and the steam hissing up from the water. He closed his eyes and slouched down, letting himself relax.

“...Hinata?” Komaeda’s voice was small, but it was enough to break Hinata from his thoughts.

Hinata had thought they were going by the unspoken rule of *not* talking here, but whatever. He sighed, cracked open his eyes, and turned to the left to see Komaeda staring at him, an unreadable expression on his pale face.

“...Yeah?” he mumbled, turning forwards again.

“Earlier, when we were... talking. By the side of the road,” Komaeda said quietly. “You told me- you said that you used to think we could have been friends.”

Hinata nodded along distantly, preparing himself for the inevitable rejection. For Komaeda to tell him he would never even *consider* being friends with a Reserve student, to scoff at the mere idea of it, to laugh right in his face.

But Komaeda did none of those things. Instead, he let out a small breath, and said, very nervously, “Did you really mean it?”

Hinata finally snuck a glance at him. Komaeda was very pointedly looking away from him, still staring upwards, but even from here Hinata could see the doubt on his face. He looked almost *terrified*, and Hinata suddenly recognized that he was scared of being rejected, too. This was a turning point, he realized. Something was about to change here. He could feel it. So when Hinata turned back towards the sky, he decided to be brave. “I still do.”

And then he could could practically *feel* the way Komaeda froze up next to him. "...That's not very funny, Hinata," Komaeda replied eventually.

"Yeah, well," he said. "It wasn't a joke."

Komaeda turned towards him quickly, disbelief clearly written across his face. There was water sliding down his bare collarbone, and Hinata forced himself to keep his eyes on Komaeda's face. "...Friends?" he repeated, as if he didn't quite believe that was what Hinata had actually said. "You would really still want to be friends with someone as worthless as me? Even after I've been so- so *repulsive* to be around?"

"You weren't *all* bad." Hinata shrugged. "I mean, you did save me from getting stabbed. That's gotta count for something."

"I suppose, but I also blew up our car."

"Yeah," Hinata said, a wry smile creeping over his face. "But you made sure I was out of the blast radius."

Komaeda just shook his head. "But I'm *also* the reason we've kept getting lost!"

Hinata narrowed his eyes. "Are you seriously trying to talk me out of being friends with you?"

"I... I don't think it would be safe." Komaeda looked down.

"Yeah, but do you *want* to?"

Komaeda nodded quickly.

"It's settled, then." Hinata looked at him, a small, tired smile on his face. "We're friends."

At least they finally had two beds. The inn was a traditional Japanese kind of place, which meant rolling out tatami mats and futons on the floor. Hinata didn't sleep like that often, but he'd always felt well-rested when he did, and he probably could have passed out anywhere after the day he'd had. He and Komaeda had set up their futons on opposite sides of the room, which made sense, given their track record of sleeping next to each other. If he woke up spooning Komaeda again, he might actually die of embarrassment.

By the time he finally got his futon set up, Komaeda was already tucked into his. Hinata stood up to turn off the lights, then collapsed onto his futon, exhaustion making his whole body feel heavy.

It was slightly odd, though, without Komaeda laying next to him. He didn't *miss* it, or anything, it was just - different, he supposed, to feel his presence across the room without being able to touch him.

Not that he *wanted* to touch him.

Hinata screwed his eyes shut, trying to focus on anything besides the boy across the room from him. Before he let himself drift off, though, he made himself say one more thing.

“...G’night, Komaeda.”

“...Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

personally i think it's very funny that the days and chapters do not match up. god told me to write but she sure didn't teach me how to count

day 4

Chapter Summary

Or: Hajime Hinata's 100% guaranteed guide to making new friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Wake up, Hinata.”

“...Ugh.” Hinata, still half-asleep, buried his face in his pillow to block out the noise coming from above him.

“C’mon, you have to get up soon if we want to catch the ferry. You don’t want to be stuck here with me for an extra day, right?”

Hinata pulled up the blankets and screwed his eyes shut tighter.

“...I brought coffee?”

That one worked. Hinata sat up and rubbed at his eyes, slowly adjusting to the early morning light of the room. Komaeda was standing over his futon, already dressed, holding two paper cups in his hands as he looked down at Hinata with wide green eyes.

Hinata stretched out his arms, shivering as the blanket slipped off his shoulders. He almost wished he’d slept next Komaeda again, because at least that had kept him warm. *Not in a weird way, or anything*, he told himself. More like a heating blanket. Or socks.

Standing up quickly, he grabbed the coffee from Komaeda and swallowed down a large gulp. *He really needed to stop thinking in the morning.*

They’d barely made it to the ferry on time. Hinata’s aversion to waking up early and Komaeda’s complete lack of direction had forced them on a mad dash through the streets of Hakodate until they finally found the docks.

Being so late meant that the inside of the ferry was already crowded, so they’d been forced to go to the otherwise empty top deck. The boat swayed beneath Hinata’s feet as it drifted on the ocean waves, sending wind and salt against his face. The view was nice - cloudy sky tinged pink by the sunrise, blue-green water all around, seabirds flying overhead - Hinata just wished it wasn’t so cold. He tugged his uniform jacket tighter around his shoulders as he sat down next to Komaeda on the deck, leaning back against the railing.

Neither spoke for a while; Hinata was still waking up, taking occasional sips of his now-lukewarm coffee, and Komaeda... well.

Since last night, Komaeda had just been *looking* at him. Whenever Hinata sent a glance in the other boy's direction, Komaeda would already be staring at him with some intense and unreadable expression on his face. (When their eyes met, though, Komaeda would always freeze and look away, as if he'd caught himself doing something he shouldn't.) Hinata was half-convinced Komaeda was going to take back everything nice he'd said and try to kill him right then and there.

It was clear that whatever small universe existed between them had shifted on its axis, leaving them both unsteady in the wake. At least they weren't fighting, but now it was just... silent. The only dialogue they'd had since they stepped onto the ferry was Komaeda's incredibly awkward opening line of, *'Do you like boats?'*

Hinata wanted to start some sort of a conversation, but he couldn't drag up a single thing to talk about. Asking about the weather was sure to bore them both, talking about Hope's Peak would just be awkward, and *hey, remember when you blew up our car?* felt a bit too confrontational for small talk.

He was beginning to realize he didn't actually know that much about Komaeda. For as out-there as the guy seemed, he was actually pretty guarded about his personal life. Hinata wanted to know more, though, and he supposed the only way to do that was to ask.

"Hey," he said, knocking his knee against Komaeda's. "Tell me something about yourself."

Komaeda looked up at him with a slightly puzzled expression. "Well, I tend to have better luck on boats than planes," he started, "so we'll probably be fi--"

"Something *not* related to your talent," Hinata interrupted, narrowing his eyes.

"...Not related to my talent," Komaeda repeated blankly.

"Or hope, or despair, or any of that. Talk about your hobbies, or things you like to do. Y'know, like. Friend stuff." At the blank look on Komaeda's face, Hinata rolled his eyes. "You do know what friends are, right?"

"Yes," muttered Komaeda unconvincingly. "I'm just... not quite sure what you expect me to say."

Hinata felt his edges soften a bit, and he had to remind himself that this wasn't the same Komaeda as before. Trying to start over, he attempted an encouraging smile. "We agreed to be friends, right? Friends are supposed to know random stuff about each other."

Komaeda bit his lip. "Perhaps you can give me an example?"

"Yeah, okay," he said, then cleared his throat. "Uh, my name is Hajime Hinata. I'm eighteen and I grew up in Ikebukuro. My favorite food is kusamochi, but I hate sakuramochi. I like

video games and TV shows about detectives. I have a driver's license, but not a car, and I ride a skateboard, even though I'm kind of bad at it. ”

“Um,” Komaeda tilted his head, deep in thought. His nose was slightly scrunched in concentration, and Hinata hated that it was just the smallest bit endearing. Komaeda seemed to think for a while before finally settling on, “...I like dogs?”

Hinata let out a surprised laugh. Out of everything Komaeda might have said, he really hadn't been expecting that. “Really?”

Komaeda looked down nervously. “Is that adequate?”

“Yeah, that's great, Komaeda,” he assured. “Have you ever had a dog?”

He nodded. “When I was a kid. His name was Lucky.”

Hinata snickered. “Of course it was.”

Komaeda glanced up at him. “Have you ever had a pet?”

“Nah. My parents' apartment complex didn't allow them, so the only animal I've ever taken care of was a hermit crab we passed around in elementary school.”

The edges of Komaeda's lips twitched up. “Tanaka would be disappointed in you.”

“You have no idea.” Hinata rolled his eyes. “He told me my magic essence capped out at a *lowly five*.”

“Well, you probably still have it better than me,” said Komaeda. “He thinks I'm a *chaos demon*.”

“Yeah, okay, you win.” Hinata grinned. “Alright, what else do you like?”

“...Reading,” Komaeda said after a moment. “I'm interested in all kinds of stories, but my favorites are psychological thrillers.”

“That... doesn't really surprise me.”

“I like English murder mystery novels, too.” Komaeda seemed to actually be getting into this. Hinata felt a surge of pride and something else he couldn't quite name as he watched Komaeda continue. “My favorite food is onigiri. I tend to like salty things more than sweet ones. I've been told I'm good at chess, though I'm not sure if that's just my luck or if I'm somehow actually skilled at something. My favorite color is green. I can't get rid of my bedhead no matter what I do, and I've never seen a normal three-leaf clover in real life before.” When Komaeda finally looked back at him, he seemed to realize how much he'd said, and an embarrassed expression quickly settled over his face. “Ah! I'm sorry for burdening you with such useless information! Of course you don't care about all of that! You're free to forget about all of it! Erase it from your memory, even!”

“I do care, Komaeda. That’s why I asked,” he said, just a little bit fond. *Maybe talking to Komaeda wasn’t actually the worst thing in the world.*

“It’s just, I... haven’t really had many friends before,” Komaeda confessed. “So I apologize if I’m doing it wrong.”

“You’re doing fine,” Hinata said. “You don’t have to worry so much, alright? Think of this as a new beginning.

Komaeda tilted his head, leaning back against the railing. “That’s kind of funny.”

“You think?”

“Well, your given name means beginning, right?”

Hinata blinked, surprised Komaeda had thought about something like that. “That’s the pronunciation, yeah, but the kanji it’s written with is different.”

“What is it, then?”

“It’s-” Hinata paused, dug around his backpack, and finally pulled out a sharpie. “Here. Uh, give me your hand.”

Komaeda dutifully put out his palm, and Hinata loosely held his wrist to keep it in place. With his other hand, he carefully wrote out his given name. When he was satisfied, he capped the pen and let go of Komaeda’s hand. In the center of Komaeda’s palm, written in dark marker and slightly messy handwriting, was the kanji 創.

“Ah.” Komaeda looked down, wide-eyed. “Is that, um. Permanent marker?”

“Oh.” Hinata nervously twirled the marker around in his fingers. “Yeah, I guess. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” Komaeda still hadn’t looked away from his hand. “...It’s kind of nice.”

A seagull cawed overhead, and the boat continued on.

The boat docked in Aomori just before noon. Hinata had found a community bulletin board near the edge of the docks, and he was searching for the number of a car rental place or a taxi company. Komaeda stood next to him, watching the ocean as he leaned back against the board.

“I don’t think we’re gonna find anything helpful here,” Hinata said, frowning as he turned to Komaeda.

“Perhaps we might ask one of my classmates for assistance,” offered Komaeda. “After all, I’m always eager for the opportunity to witness their talents in action!”

“Huh. That’s not a bad idea.” Hinata tilted his head in thought. “Soda might have some connections with auto garages around here... Sonia could get us... I dunno, what do princesses drive?”

“In my experience?” said Komaeda. “Tanks.”

Hinata grinned. “We could ask Kuzuryuu, if you don’t mind driving a car that’s definitely been used to commit several crimes.”

“Not much different than our last car, then.”

“...Good point.”

Hinata turned back to the board, scouring it for anything helpful. He still wasn’t finding much of anything, but his eyes kept falling on a ridiculously bright pink sheet of paper. As he took it down, he looked closer at the design. In a large, messy font, the flyer stated that a band called ‘Punk-11037’ was playing as part of an underground concert in downtown Aomori later that night. He was about to put the concert flyer back, regarding it as a lost cause, before he was overcome with the strange feeling that he recognized something he’d read. “Hey, Komaeda.” Hinata looked up to face him. “Do you recognize the name Leon Kuwata?”

Komaeda nodded eagerly, his eyes taking on a near-fanatic gleam. “Kuwata is in the class below mine at Hope’s Peak! His talent is the Ultimate Baseball Player. He plays with Japan’s national team, even though he’s just a teenager, and it’s even been rumored that he can pitch at over 160 kilometers per hour!”

“...He’s a baseball player?” Hinata narrowed his eyes. “Then why the hell is he in this band?” He pointed to the text on the flyer reading *‘featuring EXTREMELY TALENTED and WILDLY ATTRACTIVE lead singer LEON KUWATA.’*

Komaeda leaned in, looking at the flyer with renewed curiosity. “There’s been rumors that Kuwata wants to get his talent changed to the Ultimate Rockstar. I knew he’d been practicing with Mioda, but I had no idea he was taking it this far! What incredible dedication to talent!”

“Is he any good?” Hinata asked.

“I guess we’ll find out!” Komaeda chimed.

“Find out?” Hinata scoffed. “We are *not* going to this.”

“Do I really have to spell this out for you?” Komaeda sighed. “If we go to Kuwata’s concert, we’ll be able to talk to him afterwards. He must have come here from Hope’s Peak, and he’s going to have to return there, right?”

“So we can catch a ride back with him!” Hinata concluded. “Oh, shit. That’s actually a really good plan, Komaeda.” *Especially given that his last plan had been blowing up their only mode of transportation.* Hinata shoved the flyer in his pocket, then looked up. “Y’know, the concert’s not until nine. We have some time to kill.”

“...To kill *who*?”

“Oh my *god*, that’s not-” Hinata groaned. “I meant time to, like, explore the city. Get food. Buy things.”

“Oh.” Komaeda paused. “...That does make more sense. I suppose if we’re going to be shopping, I’d like to buy new clothes.”

“...Good point,” Hinata said, grimacing as he looked down at himself. “Our old ones are kinda covered in saltwater.”

“And mud,” added Komaeda.

“And explosion debris.” Hinata looked up, directing his gaze towards the city. “Alright, then. Let’s go.”

As they started walking up the road, Komaeda turned towards him again. “...Just to be clear, we *aren’t* killing anyone, right?”

“*Please* stop talking.”

They stopped at a thrift store first. Komaeda seeming to be putting actual effort into picking clothes, but Hinata just grabbed a couple things that looked like they might fit. Aside from that one time he’d relented to let Ibuki and Tanaka give him a makeover, he’d never really thought too much about what he wore.

Hinata bought a small pile of whatever he could find, then grabbed a random shirt and pair of jeans to take with him into the dressing room. After he finished changing, he tossed his uniform in his backpack and turned to look at himself in the mirror. The jeans fit pretty well, if a bit baggy, but the shirt was another story. It was tight and black and absolutely a size too small as it clung to his chest. Hinata wasn’t ashamed of how he looked, exactly - he’d trained with Nidai enough times to know that he had a ‘*surprisingly toned physique*,’ but that didn’t make it any less embarrassing to wear the shirt in public.

But, well. He’d already bought it, so he just shrugged at his reflection and stepped out of the dressing room. And whether it was bad luck or just coincidence, Komaeda exited his own dressing room at the exact same time.

“Ah...Hinata?” Komaeda was staring at him again, but unlike earlier, he was devoutly refusing to make eye contact. “That’s an, um. Interesting outfit!”

“That feels like a joke when *you* say it,” Hinata replied, gesturing to Komaeda’s new clothes. “What is that, a wallet chain?”

He was tempted to call Komaeda’s ensemble fitting of an emo boy-band reject, and he might have said it out loud if it didn’t look so stupidly good on him. Komaeda’s long legs were complimented by tight black skinny jeans, ripped at the knees, and the aforementioned skull wallet chain. He’d paired the jeans with a short-sleeved red shirt - which made sense, given that they were driving south in the middle of summer, but was different than anything Hinata had ever seen him in before.

“Is this really how you dress outside of school?” he asked. It came out fonder than he’d wanted it to, but he did actually want to know. This felt like he was seeing a whole new part of Komaeda. Something Komaeda trusted him to see.

“I did the best I could, given the circumstances.” Komaeda glanced at himself in the mirror. “Am I really that repulsive to look at?”

“Not what I meant,” Hinata said. “You look... nice, Komaeda.” It wasn’t a lie, either.

“And you look-” Komaeda still wouldn’t meet his eyes, which was starting to feel intentional. “Um.”

As a last resort, Hinata grabbed a tacky Hawaiian shirt from a nearby sale rack and shrugged it on as a second layer. “There. Now I’m *decent*.”

Komaeda looked him over again. “I really don’t think that’s better.”

“Too late. This is your fault now.”

“This must be why they don’t let you dress yourselves in the Reserve Course,” said Komaeda.

Hinata immediately glared at him - he’d thought they were over this. Oddly, though, Komaeda didn’t look condescending - he was covering his mouth with one hand, letting out small puffs of breath, and *oh*, he was laughing.

“Wow, he has jokes,” Hinata deadpanned. “I didn’t know I was talking to the Ultimate Comedian.”

“They’d never give me a title like that!”

Hinata raised his eyebrows. “You’re right. They wouldn’t.”

A wry smile came over Komaeda’s face. “Now who’s being rude, hm?”

“Still you.”

With their one task now completed, Hinata was a bit lost on what to do next. He still felt just a bit like he was walking on eggshells - after spending so much time locked in opposition with Komaeda, their friendship was fragile. Like if either of them pushed too hard, something was going to break.

Either way, it seemed easier to leave than to stay there. So he and Komaeda set out aimlessly around the city for the rest of the afternoon, stopping at whatever stores or tourist attractions looked interesting. There was a small beachside shrine, rice fields designed to look like paintings, a museum full of festival floats and lanterns. Aomori was pretty, Hinata decided. Despite the circumstances, he was glad he was there.

Of course, the whole time, Komaeda kept him supplied with facts about the city he had absolutely no reason to know. Like, ‘this is the northernmost prefecture on the main island,’ or, ‘there’s a mountain around here rumored to be one of the gates to the underworld!’ or, ‘did you know that Aomori is the number one apple producer in Japan?’

(That last one was true, by the way. There was apple-themed stuff *everywhere*. Hinata even let Komaeda talk him into trying apple-flavored ice cream, which was surprisingly great.)

Hinata pulled Komaeda into some sushi restaurant as soon as it started to get dark, feeling especially hungry after a full day of exploring the city. They fought over food with chopsticks and almost knocked Komaeda’s glass of water off the table, snickering the whole time.

It was weird, when Hinata thought about it - five days ago, if someone had told him that he would be having actual, genuine fun with his *friend Komaeda*, he would have laughed in their face.

By the time they managed to find the concert venue, Hinata was starting feel an inkling of doubt about their plan.

The only way into the building was through an alley, which had lead the two of them to an old door covered in various flyers and stickers. Hinata tilted his head, hearing the faint sounds of music thumping from inside.

“This venue is kinda suspicious-looking, huh?” he said.

“It’s... not quite what I was expecting of an Ultimate,” Komaeda agreed, wrinkling his nose.

“Well, we’ve already made it this far.” Hinata shrugged. “Let’s just head in.”

He pulled open the door, and the two were immediately hit with a wall of pure noise. The venue was on the smaller side, but still large enough to fit a pretty significant crowd. Brightly colored spotlights were the only source of brightness slashing through the dark of the room. People were cheering as they crowded around the stage, on top of which a group of girls were playing instruments loudly.

Hinata gestured to the reception booth and Komaeda followed. They paid for tickets, got their hands stamped, and continued into the crowd.

“Man, Ibuki would love this place,” marveled Hinata. He quickly snapped a picture of the band with his phone and sent it to her, and a few seconds later, she responded.

IBUKI ☆彡: *ur for realsies at a real-life concert???? color ibuki 31 flavors of jealous* (π~~π)

Me: pretty cool, right?

IBUKI ☆彡: *DUH!! now’s ur chance to do that awesome concert scream just like we practiced!! throw in some head banging too!! \(\geq \nabla \leq)/*

Me: i'm... probably not gonna do that.

IBUKI ☆彡: LAME-O (¬ε¬)

IBUKI ☆彡: yes, yes, yes, i see! this is why u require the instruction of wise master ibuki on the art of musical etiquette! only i can teach u to remove thoust head from thy ass!

Me: if that's your weird way of inviting me to a concert, i accept.

Me: in the case that i actually come back to tokyo alive.

*IBUKI ☆彡: awww don't u worry about that!!! i'd take nasty dead zombie hinata to concerts, too!! even if he was all stinky and decomposing like a pumpkin after valentine's day!!!!!!
o(*>ω<*)o*

Me: u really need to learn what analogies are.

IBUKI ☆彡: i know what an analogy is!! it's like a thought with another thought's hat on!!!!!!

Me: that's not even close to right.

IBUKI ☆彡: well u text like an old man!!

Me: i do not.

IBUKI ☆彡: c'mon, spice it up!!!! give ibuki an emoji ☆ ^ (∂ ¬ <)

Me: no.

IBUKI ☆彡: hinataaaa (~ ^)

Me: whatever.

Me: :)

IBUKI ☆彡: HINATAAAAAA!!!!!!

With a low laugh, he closed his phone and looked up. To his surprise, Komaeda was right in front of him, holding two beer bottles in his hands.

“How did you even get those?” Hinata asked, slightly taken back.

He shrugged with a small, knowing smile. “Lucky.”

“And you say your talent is useless.” Hinata snickered and took one bottle from Komaeda's hand. “Thanks.”

They watched the next couple bands from the edge of the crowd, and even Hinata couldn't resist tapping his foot and swaying along to the music in between drinks. He liked parties, and he loved his friends, but he really wasn't a huge fan of being the center of attention. He much preferred to stand on the fringe.

It seemed Komaeda was the same way. It was strange, but it was nice to have someone on the edge with him.

In between sets, Hinata felt Komaeda lean in just a bit closer. "I usually don't like noisy places, but I don't really mind it here," he said.

"Yeah." Hinata took a sip of his drink. He could feel Komaeda's breath against his neck. "I feel the same way."

They ended up going through several bands before '*Punk-11037*' finally started their set. Komaeda pointed out the wild-looking red-haired guy as Kuwata just before they started playing. Hinata nodded along, and he noticed with amusement that Komaeda was cheering extra-hard for this band. Kuwata was actually pretty good, Hinata decided, but he probably would have been better if he wasn't trying so hard to show off.

Finally, their set ended - going out with a bang as Kuwata smashed his guitar against the stage. "Goodnight, Aomori!" he yelled, a wide grin on his face. "If you wanna bask in our band's awesome rock n' roll glory, we'll be hangin' out by the bar." And with that, Kuwata jumped offstage.

Hinata tapped Komaeda's arm to get his attention, then tipped his head over to where Kuwata was leaning against the bar. Komaeda nodded, and Hinata stepped forwards, stumbling just a bit before righting himself.

Komaeda let out a soft laugh. "Lightweight."

Hinata snorted, looking at the flushed color of Komaeda's face. "Oh, like you're one to talk."

They got to the bar, Hinata pushing his way through the crowd as Komaeda followed behind him. Finally, he spotted Kuwata leaning against the bar, and he waited until he finished signing an autograph for a group of giggling girls to approach him.

"Uh, Kuwata?" Hinata called, taking a step forwards.

The guy turned towards him, waving eagerly. "Call me Leon!"

"It's an honor to meet you, Leon!" exclaimed Komaeda. "Your talent burns so brightly! It fills me with hope!"

While most people probably would have been weirded out by that, Leon just grinned. "Oh, you guys are fans, huh? D'you want me to autograph something? I'll totally do it!"

"Maybe later," Hinata cut in. "We have a question for you, actually."

“Is it about the band name?” Leon asked excitedly. “It’s is actually *my* name, but, like, upside down. Yeah, I know, it rules.”

“*Totally* rules!” chimed Komaeda.

“Uh, for sure,” added Hinata. “But that... wasn’t actually my question.”

“Oh, then it’s about the instruments, right?” Leon interrupted. “I’ll let ya in on a secret. If you’re in a punk band, it doesn’t matter if you can play or not!”

Hinata thought that really didn’t seem right, but he couldn’t find it in himself to contradict the other boy. “No, it’s-”

“Hey, wait. I recognize you, don’t I?” Leon said. When Hinata gestured to himself, confused, Leon shook his head. “Not you. You’re generic. Hot, but generic.”

Hinata’s face went pink. “Uh... thanks?”

“I meant *him*.” Leon pointed at Komaeda. “You go to Hope’s Peak too, right?”

Komaeda nodded. “We both do, actually.”

Hinata whipped around to stare at him, shocked that Komaeda had actually admitted they both went to the same school without even *mentioning* the Reserve Course.

“Dude, no way!” Leon said.

“Yes way. I’m Nagito Komaeda, and this is Hajime Hinata.”

“Komaeda...” Leon kept his gaze fixed on Komaeda before suddenly snapping his fingers. “Oh, I got it! Aren’t you the dude who tried to blow up the gym?”

Hinata’s jaw dropped even further. “You did *what*?”

“Haha, I guess I did!” Komaeda chimed, a slight nervous edge to his voice.

But Kuwata just nodded approvingly. “That’s punk rock, dude.”

Komaeda brightened instantly at the approval of an Ultimate. “Thank you!”

“Is this a habit of yours?” Hinata muttered to Komaeda.

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” he replied primly.

Hinata raised his eyebrows. “You blew up our *car*.”

“Only *once*,” Komaeda protested. He was almost pouting.

Hinata turned back to Leon. “Anyways. It’s kind of a long story, but basically, we’re stranded in this city. I know it’s a lot to ask, but could you give us a ride back to Hope’s Peak?”

Leon nodded. "Dude, I would love to!"

Hinata could barely contain his sigh of relief. "Thank you, that's-"

"-But I can't," Leon said.

"What."

"We're on the road for another two weeks, man! The life of a musician is full of trials and tribulations to conquer. Punk never dies!" Leon glanced at them sympathetically. "Tell ya what, though. I'll put you guys up in a room at the hotel I'm staying at. Manager's a huge baseball fan, so I can totally get a room for you, free of charge."

"...Thanks, man," Hinata said, keeping himself from sighing out loud. "That's- that's really cool of you."

"Sure, dude!" Leon grinned, apparently oblivious to Hinata's plight. "Do you want an autograph to make up for it?"

Komaeda, in fact, did want an autograph (he got Leon to sign his ticket), and he also had it in him to ask for a picture. Hinata was going to take it, but Leon insisted he was in the photo - *'my biggest fans have got to both be here with me, dudes!'*

So Leon had tossed Hinata's phone to some random concert-goer and pulled Hinata into the photo, right up against Komaeda. Hinata wrapped his arm around Komaeda's waist, trying not to look awkward, and smiled for the photo.

Shortly after that, Leon heard another group of 'fans' calling his name, so he jumped out of the photo and waved at them. He hopped over the bar towards them, but before he left, he looked back over his shoulder at Hinata and Komaeda, flashing them a rock 'n' roll salute with his hand. "Rock on, dudes!"

After a moment, Hinata quickly dropped his arm from Komaeda's waist and took a step backwards. Snatching his phone back from the stranger with a muttered *'thank you,'* he turned away from the bar and walked towards the door.

They left the concert venue soon after that, heading towards the hotel Leon had told them about. The city was incredible at night - light shining down from windows, stars dotting the sky, glittering ocean in the distance. Komaeda walked next to him, step-in-step, and Hinata turned towards him.

"So you really think that Leon guy can get his talent changed?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Well, it was incredible to meet him, and he was *very* good, but... well, I'm not sure," Komaeda hummed. "He was born with one talent, but now he's working towards another. It's admirable, but a part of me feels as if he's neglecting his original talent."

Hinata shrugged. "I don't think it matters what he's born with. I think it matters what he tries at," he said. "I mean, take Sonia, for example. There's tons of princesses in the world, but Hope's Peak chose Sonia. She's an Ultimate because of the work and dedication she puts into her talent, not just because of the way she was born." He swallowed. "What I'm trying to say is, maybe talent isn't finite. And even when it is a natural gift, it's still something you have to tap into and actually work towards."

"...I was born lucky, so I think I've always just assumed everyone else must have been born with their talents, too. My talent is something I can't control, but... I suppose it isn't like that for most people." Komaeda looked down. "Still, though. You have to start out with some amount of talent in order to polish it. And for someone like me, born with such a worthless talent - it's my job to help them do just that."

"Well, what about someone," Hinata started carefully, hands shoved in his pockets, "someone who was born without any talent at all?"

"I- well." Komaeda bit his lip. "I still- I mean, people can't just *become* talented." He waited a good, long moment, then said, "But perhaps certain people can become... special."

Hinata's exhale sounded a whole lot like a sigh of relief. "Special, huh?"

"Yes." Komaeda smiled, just a little bit, and it lit up his whole face. "Special."

Hinata didn't say anything, just ducked his head to hide his own smile.

It was a few more blocks before they finally made it to the hotel, checking in and taking the elevator up to their room. The place was clearly more expensive than anywhere they'd stayed before - apparently Leon's name really carried some weight around here. The TV was huge, the ceilings were vaulted, and the sheets on the bed even looked like they had ridiculously high thread counts.

And that's when Hinata realized it - the *bed*, because there was, in fact, only one.

"Oh, that *jerk*," he muttered.

"The bed isn't the only surprise he left us," Komaeda said from next to the bedside table, holding up the CD case that had been sitting there. "I know what we're listening to tomorrow."

Hinata felt his jaw drop - apparently, Leon had given them a signed CD.

While Komaeda left for the bathroom to get ready for bed, Hinata tossed on a pair of sweatpants and collapsed against the (admittedly luxurious) mattress. He let himself relax there for a moment before pulling out his phone. Now that their first plan to get back to Tokyo had failed, he was going to have to fall back on Plan B.

He scrolled through his contacts until he found the right number, pressing the phone to his ear as he waited for the other line to pick up.

The other line clicked on, and a voice immediately asked: "What the hell do you want?"

“Nice to hear from you too, Kuzuryu,” Hinata said.

Kuzuryu snorted. “Are you coming home yet, you bastard?”

“Not even close,” said Hinata. “That’s why I need to ask a favor of you. Your family has connections all over Japan, right? Do you think you could get them to send us a car?”

“What happened to the one you hotwired?” he asked, suspicion clear in his voice.
“*Illegally?*”

“Uh.” Hinata paused. “It got blown up. Please don’t ask how.”

Kuzuryu sighed loudly. “Let me get this straight. You want me to tap into my family’s incredibly dangerous crime network so I can get you a car for your road trip.”

Hinata shifted the phone awkwardly. “...Yeah?”

“Sure, okay. I’ll have one dropped off at your hotel tomorrow. Text me the address later.”

“Thanks, man. That’s really cool of you.” Hinata let out a deep breath. “By the way, it’s *not* a road trip.”

Kuzuryu just snickered. “Yeah, try telling Soda that.”

“I *have*,” Hinata protested. “Seriously, though. Thank you. I mean it.”

“Whatever. It’s not a big deal. And Hinata.” He paused. “Stay safe, alright?”

“Aw, you really *do* care,” Hinata said dryly.

“You know what? Maybe I won’t send you a car.”

“Okay, hardass. You do that.”

“Bye, dick,” Kuzuryu said, a hint of fondness sneaking into his voice.

“Bye, jerk.” Hinata hung up the phone, grinning.

He closed out of the phone app, then, after a moment of thought, opened his camera roll. The photos from the concert were all in order - there was the one he’d sent Ibuki, followed by several of him, Komaeda, and Leon taken by the random guy from the venue. But the guy had apparently kept taking photos, even after Leon had left, which meant there was one picture of *just* Hinata and Komaeda.

He tapped on it, curious. Komaeda had one arm slung over Hinata’s shoulders, the other hanging in the air where Leon had been, showing the slightly faded ink of Hinata’s name written on Komaeda’s palm. Komaeda was looking at the camera, and he was grinning like he’d just won the lottery.

Hinata considered that was probably a bad comparison, seeing as Komaeda had most likely won the lottery more times than he could count. So he'd won something else, then. Something better. For the life of him, though, Hinata couldn't figure out what. He'd never been good with comparisons. The point was, Komaeda looked happy.

And as he looked closer at the photo, he realized that they *both* did. His own arm was wrapped around Komaeda's waist, pressed against his side - and he was smiling, too, wide and almost carefree. He zoomed in a bit, staring at the photo like he couldn't take his eyes off of it.

Then he heard the bathroom door open, and he immediately turned off his phone and tossed it halfway across the room.

"Ah- Hinata?" Komaeda was standing in the doorway, obviously confused.

Hinata stared down at his hands, because he was *also* confused as to why he'd done that. "Uh, I called Kuzuryu!" he said quickly, hoping to cause some sort of distraction. "He's gonna send us a car tomorrow. In the morning. Tomorrow."

Komaeda blinked. "...That's very generous!" he said, finally. "Helping us out on such short notice - as to be expected of someone as talented as him!"

"Good old Kuzuryu," snorted Hinata, leaning back against the bed. "Always so *helpful*."

He could hear Komaeda shuffle over to the other side of the bed, but he stilled at the edge for a moment. "This is... still okay, right?"

"Huh?"

"The bed thing. *Sharing*." Komaeda shifted from foot to foot, nervous. "I mean, I don't want you to feel like you're obligated to, now that we're... friends, or that you can't back out just because it's happened before. To be completely honest, I'm surprised you aren't disgusted by it yet. Ah, do you want to back out? Do you want me to sleep in the bathtub?"

"...I don't," Hinata said, slightly confused. Komaeda still didn't move, and Hinata rolled his eyes. "I *don't* want you to do that, Komaeda. Seriously. It's fine."

"Well. If you say so." Komaeda waited for one more moment, like he was expecting Hinata to suddenly change his mind and kick him out. That didn't happen, of course, and a second later, Komaeda climbed onto the bed.

Hinata didn't look at him, but he registered the way the mattress dipped just slightly. There was more space between them than he'd expected, more than there had been other nights, even though Komaeda wasn't even hanging off the edge this time. The bed really was ridiculously large.

He pushed himself up on his hands to turn off the light, then rolled back onto the bed - and if he *happened* to be a couple inches closer to the center, it's not like either of them would notice.

Komaeda turned towards him, just a little bit, but the rustle of the blankets gave him away. “Goodnight, Hinata.” He whispered it, even though they were the only two people in the room.

Hinata glanced over at him, only for a second. “Goodnight.” And he didn’t know why, but he’d whispered it, too.

Chapter End Notes

me: *frantically googling "things to do in aomori, japan"*

google: "aomori contains an active volcano believed to be one of the gates to the underworld."

me: ????????

fanart<3: https://www.instagram.com/p/COd5Pdbl5ft/?utm_medium=copy_link

day 5

Chapter Summary

A day full of mafia deals, awkward slow-dancing, and unexpected fondness for a guy who cheats at arcade games.

Chapter Notes

hi, sorry it's been so long - midterms kicked my butt and finals were somehow only a few weeks later!! luckily (hehe) it's been more calm now so i've been glad to be able to write more. the posting schedule should resume to normal after this!!

and now, back to our regularly scheduled programming.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Hinata woke up, he wasn't at all surprised by the body wrapped around his.

It was practically tradition at this point, really. Something embarrassing to laugh off and forget when he got back home. Almost every morning of the trip, he'd woken up entwined with Komaeda on a hotel mattress - what was one more?

The more Hinata thought about it, the more he considered that it probably had something to do with Komaeda's stupid luck. Somehow, though, he couldn't really bring himself to think of it as *bad* luck. Hinata slept better like this, almost - the usual dark circles under his eyes were basically gone. And it was kind of... nice, waking up next to someone else. Starting your days together. The most basic sort of human connection.

Even if it *was* with Komaeda.

Hinata's gaze flickered upwards, just a bit, to glance at Komaeda's face. He was struck by this Komaeda - this peaceful, sleepy version of him, with his slightly rumpled clothes, sleep-tousled hair, dark circles fully visible under his eyes. Hinata had never gotten the chance to really *look* before.

He felt a small burst of something he couldn't quite pin down - *satisfaction*, he guessed, that he'd been right. He was almost scared he'd imagined it, before, but it had happened again. This wasn't just some fluke, some side effect of two random people getting trapped together. Komaeda was seeking him out on purpose.

Something tightened in his chest, and Hinata made himself pull away. He pushed himself up on his elbow, but he was still looking at Komaeda. It took more effort than it should have to reach over and nudge his shoulder, a sleep-rough *'wake up'* muttered under his breath.

Slowly, Komaeda blinked his eyes open, and then all at once they went owlshly wide as he jolted awake.

"G'morning," Hinata half-yawned, pausing to pull his wrinkled shirt back up from where it had slipped below his collarbone.

"Morning. Yes." Komaeda was staring at him, but he hadn't moved an inch. "Give every morning the chance to make new hope shine." His face had gone pink, and his voice came out slightly breathy, which, *what*.

Hinata raised his eyebrows, more than a little confused. "...Sure."

Komaeda didn't say anything else, just kept looking at him, so Hinata figured the conversation was over. He pushed himself off the bed, pausing to pick up his phone which was, embarrassingly, still lying the floor where he'd thrown it last night. He scowled at it, just a little bit, like that would mean anything to a piece of metal. Grabbing some clothes from his nearby bag, he started towards the bathroom. Before he could open the door, though, he heard Komaeda softly clear his throat behind him.

When he turned around, he saw Komaeda was still sitting on the bed, fiddling with the sheets. "Did I, ah. Did I do anything unseemly when I was sleeping?"

"Huh?" Hinata leaned against the doorframe. "No, dude. You're fine."

"...You're sure?" he asked. He wouldn't look Hinata in the eye.

Hinata rolled his eyes. "If I was annoyed at you, I would just tell you. You know that."

Komaeda brightened, just a little bit. "Yes, I suppose you would," he said, sounding happier about something like that than he probably should have.

Hinata turned to him one last time before he closed the door. "You worry too much."

They were out of the hotel just before checkout. Kuzuryu had texted Hinata a time and a place to meet so he could pick up the promised car - a park just a couple blocks from the hotel.

Komaeda had almost tripped on the walk there. Hinata had grabbed his bicep to steady him, and Komaeda hadn't stopped looking down at his arm for the next five minutes.

Now they were standing in front of some old statue at the park, looking out on the street. Komaeda still seemed a bit unbalanced as he fiddled with his flip phone to try and find directions. He'd grabbed a map from the lobby, and was now awkwardly unfolding it and staring at it intently while trying to mark out a path. He kept the pen cap between his teeth as he worked, which, as far as Hinata was concerned, was needlessly distracting.

Komaeda returned the pen to his pocket, frowning slightly at the map. “We should be able to make it to Miyagi today, at the very least.”

“Huh?” Hinata paused, realizing Komaeda had spoken. “Right. Sounds good to me.”

“What time do you think Kuzuryu’s car will be arriving?”

“I dunno, he said sometime around nine- there, look!”

Komaeda turned with him to see a small, discreet-looking black car pull up next to the curb. The door opened, and Hinata was expecting some muscular yakuza lackey to be at the wheel - but instead, out stepped a short blonde girl with a distinctive scowl on her face.

Hinata felt his jaw drop. “*Natsumi?*”

“Hinata?” The girl’s expression went from shocked to smug in a second. “*You’re* my big bro’s friend who got stranded up here?”

“What, he didn’t tell you?”

“He was vague with the details,” she snorted. “I just hope you know that I’m never, ever letting you live this down.”

Hinata crossed his arms. “At least I’m not my family’s designated taxi driver. What the hell are you doing out of Tokyo, anyways?”

“Mom brought me along for a ‘*girl’s spa weekend*,’ but it’s definitely just a cover for something illegal,” Natsumi explained, blowing her bangs out of her eyes. “I’m hoping if I do enough chores for her she’ll let me in on it.”

“So I’m just a chore to you?” Hinata raised his eyebrows, deadpan. “Ouch.”

She just rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Go cry to your boy toy about it.”

And Hinata could feel how quickly he blushed. “My- my *boy toy*?” he choked out.

“...Me?” Komaeda blinked, slowly raising a finger to point at himself. “Am I the boy toy?”

Natsumi’s gaze zeroed in on him. “Who *else* would I be talking about?”

“He is *not* my-” Hinata grimaced. “I’m not even gonna say it. Please just give me the car keys.”

Natsumi stuck out her tongue, but she tossed him the keys anyways. Hinata missed them by a mile. Komaeda grabbed them before they hit the ground and dropped them into Hinata’s hand.

“You’re welcome,” Natsumi lilted, skipping away from the car. She turned around for a moment, though, to wave at Hinata. “Have fun on your honeymoon road trip!”

“It’s not a road trip!” Hinata yelled after her as she walked away. “...Or a *honeymoon!*” And even as he slid into the driver’s seat, he could still hear Natsumi laughing.

Hinata scowled down at the wheel as he turned the key in the ignition. The car started up immediately, and he thanked whatever higher power was out there that they hadn’t experienced any horribly bad luck yet. Next, he looked at the radio screen, switching the channels a few times until he found one he liked.

“Hey, check it out,” he said, gesturing to one of the settings. “The car comes with a navigation system.”

Komaeda leaned in closer. “I am glad we won’t have to use my phone anymore. I was getting increasingly tired of that horrible bear.”

“You said it.” Hinata flicked the system on, and immediately:

“Puhuhu, welcome to Monokuma Navigational Services!”

As Hinata watched the stupid little animated bear dance on the map, he could only think one thing: “Oh, *goddammit.*”

The drive south was nice. Hinata watched through the windshield as they sped down the tree-lined road, blurred green and gold under the bright summer sun.

The asshole GPS bear had told them to take Tohoku Expressway, which, according to Komaeda, was the longest expressway in Japan. (Hinata still didn’t quite know why Komaeda was telling him traffic facts, but he guessed it was nice information to know.)

And *speaking* of Komaeda. The guy was leaning back in the passenger seat, legs angled with one knee leaning against the car door and the other lying across the middle cupholders. Hinata felt the rough fabric of Komaeda’s jeans slide against his hand every time he reached for the gearshift. He expected Komaeda to move his leg, but it never happened.

To pass the time, they’d started a game of counting which classmates they could find on roadside billboards. Komaeda had spotted a tour announcement for Ibuki’s new album, a sports drink advertisement featuring the swimmer girl from the class below theirs, and a promotion for Saionji’s dance concert. To his credit, Hinata was still winning with a travel promotion for Novoselic, an ad for a seedy-looking fortune teller who must have been Hiroko’s son, and a display from the Togami Conglomerate (which he’d successfully argued should count for *double* points.)

They put in Leon’s CD, too. Hinata thought that most of the songs were pretty good, but one of them, called ‘*No Crying in Baseball*,’ was so bad Hinata nearly crashed the car from how hard they were both laughing.

Komaeda had a nice laugh - when it was genuine, at least. Hinata had heard his crazy-hope-laugh and his trying-way-too-hard-to-be-casual-laugh enough for a lifetime, but he thought that he really wouldn’t mind hearing this one again.

Of course, Hinata knew the trip wasn't going to stay this nice for long - and he was proven right on a side street just outside the Morioka city limits.

"Ah, Hinata," Komaeda started, sounding just a bit nervous. "Hypothetically, if there was a symbol shaped like a thermometer flashing on the dashboard of a car, what would that mean?"

Hinata shrugged, trying to recall his auto lessons with Soda. "...That the engine's overheated, probably."

"Well, then. The engine's overheated." Komaeda pointed towards the dashboard, where there was, in fact, a little symbol lit up in red.

"Oh, *shit*," hissed Hinata. "We have to pull over." He searched the road ahead of him, then stopped the car on a small turn-off.

"Should I call a tow truck?" Komaeda looked at him, flip phone already in hand.

Hinata shook his head. "Nah, Soda warned me what to do if this happened. We just have to leave the car somewhere in the shade for a while and wait for the engine to cool down."

"...Did you ask him about this scenario, specifically?" Komaeda asked slowly.

"I texted him about a lot of things that could potentially happen - just in case, right?" Hinata said. "I mean, based on our history with cars, I thought we might need to prepare ahead."

"You were... taking my luck into account?" Komaeda's voice wavered just a little bit, so quickly it was barely noticeable. "That's very, um. Prudent of you. I, ah - thank you."

"Sure, I guess." Hinata shrugged, playing it off as casual, but he was a *little* glad his efforts were being noticed. "Do you wanna get out of the car for a bit? Stretch our legs, or whatever?"

"Please."

Hinata checked the road was empty, then opened his door and stepped out, stretching his arms out over his head. He pulled his phone from his back pocket and opened his messages, tapping on Kuzuryu's contact.

Me: dude, your car sucks.

Baby Gangsta: Maybe you just suck at driving.

Baby Gangsta: By the way, if my contact name on your phone is still 'Baby Gangsta,' I'm gonna kill you.

Me: (Screenshot at 12:32 PM)

Baby Gangsta: I'M GONNA KILL YOU.

Hinata laughed under his breath as he slid his phone back into his pocket. By the time he looked back at the car, Komaeda had already climbed onto the roof, his feet dangling over the edge.

What a weird guy, Hinata thought, trying to keep the amused smile from his face. With a shake of his head, he begun to climb up the car, too, careful not to damage the paint job. Komaeda gave him an appraising look, and Hinata sat down next to him, bracing his hands against the roof.

"Please don't blow up the car again," he said, and it was only kind of a joke.

"If Hinata insists," Komaeda replied breezily, and Hinata couldn't really tell if *he* was joking, either.

He just rolled his eyes. "That, and Kuzuryu would probably murder us on the spot. It's barely noon and he's already sent me two death threats today."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Komaeda, a wry smile on his lips. "Obviously Pekoyama would do it for him."

Hinata snorted. "How romantic," he said dryly. "D'you think those two are ever actually gonna get together?"

"Our class has been betting on it since our first year," Komaeda admitted. "I have them down for this fall."

"So that's when it's gonna happen."

Komaeda just laughed. "I'm not a fortune teller, Hinata."

"With your luck, you might as well be," Hinata said, grinning as he leaned in just a little bit closer. "Hey, use your powers here. Is there anyone who's secretly pining after me?"

"*I can't answer that*," said Komaeda, sounding oddly strained. He was looking very pointedly down at the car roof. "That's- I mean, it's not even close to my talent, so."

Hinata hesitated for a moment, looking closer at Komaeda. There was clearly something he didn't want to talk about, so he just shrugged and said, "Guess I'll have to ask Hiroko's son, then."

"*I did* save his number from the billboard," Komaeda said.

Hinata actually laughed at that. He looked at Komaeda for half a second, then made up his mind. "If we're stuck here, might as well make the best of it," he said. "Let's go get some lunch."

The walk to Morioka city center was kind of far, but it was well worth it; they'd gotten some kind of famous noodle dishes the city was known for. Getting ditched by his school had kind

of stung, but it also meant he got to avoid cafeteria food for another couple days. *Silver linings, or whatever.*

After they ate, they started walking around aimlessly, searching for something to pass the time. There were mountains and hills surrounding the edges of the city, the Kitakami river flowing through. They'd just passed by the train station when Komaeda stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, distracted by something along the way; Hinata followed his gaze to see a massive cherry tree that seemed to be growing straight out of a rock.

"I've read about this, actually," Komaeda said, taking a few steps closer. Hinata followed behind, listening to him talk. "It's called Ishiwari Zakura. Four hundred years ago, a cherry tree seed found its way into a microscopic crack in some large granite boulder. Somehow it flourished, surviving through the harsh and frigid winters, and eventually grew so strong it split the boulder. It's still growing, even today."

Hinata raised his eyebrows, impressed. "That's one hardcore tree."

Komaeda nodded eagerly. "It's a survivor."

"Wait here for a second." Hinata paused, digging around in his backpack. When he found what he'd been looking for, he grinned, pulling out a camera and holding it up. "Go stand next to it. I'll take a picture."

Komaeda stared at him for a moment, clearly confused by something. "...You have a camera?"

"Mahiru gave me her old one," he explained. "She taught me some stuff about photography. Even said that I was pretty good, *for a guy.*"

"I don't think I... understand," Komaeda said hesitantly. Hinata was expecting him to say something about *'the futile attempts of Reserve Course students to become talented,'* or whatever. Instead, he looked away, then asked: "...Why would you want to take a photo of me?"

Hinata froze, taken aback. *Fucking Komaeda, man. Always full of surprises.*

"Maybe I'm making a scrapbook," he deadpanned. Komaeda rolled his eyes at him, and Hinata shrugged. "Fun? Memories? I dunno. It just seems like the thing to do."

"...Yeah. Yeah, okay." Komaeda took a few steps backwards, his smile equal parts awkward and endearing as he stood in front of the tree.

Hinata snapped a photo, and he'd never been more thankful for how the camera covered up his stupid grin.

They kept walking around after that. Komaeda lead them to some famous temple in the area, a large, ancient place guarded by a massive wooden gate. There was one hall they stayed in for a while - Hinata couldn't stop looking at the statues. There were almost 500 of them lining the walls, all of Buddhist disciples. Each statue had a different pose, a different

expression. Hinata stared up at them, awestruck. He'd never seen anything else like this before.

After they left the temple, they followed nearby signs down a side-street to a shrine that claimed to show a demon's handprint on a large group of rocks. Hinata took another picture of Komaeda, this one of him posing next to one of the rocks and pretending to line his hand up with the demon handprint.

He looked up from the camera before grinned over at Komaeda. "I'm totally gonna send this to Tanaka."

"Now he's *really* going to think I'm a demon." Komaeda sighed, but there was something in his eyes that seemed oddly excited by the prospect.

Next, they wandered around until they found an old bookstore. It was a pretty big place, surrounding them with towering shelves filled with all kinds of books. Komaeda seemed enthralled as he inspected the shelves, and Hinata went straight for the manga section, which Komaeda teased him endlessly for. They both pointed out books they found funny, including something called *Monokuma: An Erotic Memoir*, which made Hinata laugh so loudly they almost got kicked out of the store. (He was definitely going to tell Ibuki that. With her record of getting kicked out of libraries, he knew she would be proud.)

They left the place after a while, but before they started off towards somewhere else, Hinata paused near the doorway. Komaeda looked back at him, questioning, and Hinata pushed a book into his hands.

"I got this for you," he said, a bit awkward. He still didn't really know why he'd done it.

Komaeda's expression only grew more confused. "For... me?"

"The Sign of the Four. Arthur Conan Doyle." Hinata shrugged. "You told me you like English mystery books, yeah? I had to read this for a class once, and I remember thinking it was actually pretty good. I thought you might enjoy it, I guess."

"...You're really giving me this?" Komaeda took the book hesitantly and looked over it. There were several emotions warring on his face, and Hinata wasn't quite sure which one was going to win out. "Why?"

"I dunno, it's a gift?" He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I guess that was dumb of me, I shouldn't have assumed you'd want me to-"

"No!" Komaeda glanced up nervously, but his eyes looked genuine. "I mean, this... um, makes me very happy. Thank you."

Hinata looked down, mostly just to hide his relieved smile. "It was on sale, so, y'know. No big deal."

Komaeda shook his head. "I don't know how to say this, but... I've never really received a gift before. At least... not from a friend." The word seemed foreign in his mouth.

Hinata swallowed over the lump in his throat. “Yeah, man. Just... tell me if you like it,” he said, hoping his voice didn’t reveal the concern he felt. Once again, he was overcome with a sense of unexpected sympathy. It was pretty hard to hold a grudge against the guy when he clearly disliked himself far more than Hinata ever had ever disliked him.

After the bookstore, they continued wandering around the city in search of something else to do. They passed by an arcade on some random street corner, and it was like they’d had the same thought, because both of them immediately stopped in front of the doorway.

“You wanna go in?” Hinata asked.

Komaeda looked back at him. “Nanami would be disappointed in us if we didn’t.”

Inside, it was darkly lit, most of the light coming from the brightly colored screens of the game machines. There were rows and rows of them, all clustered together. The noise was a blur of video game sound effects, 8-bit soundtracks, and other customers laughing and talking as they crowded around the machines.

Near the front was the prize booth, showing all the things you could exchange for certain amounts of tickets you won from the games. It started small, with plastic keychains, and went all the way up to things like giant stuffed animals - actually, one very *specific* giant stuffed animal.

Komaeda and Hinata tilted their heads almost in unison, staring at the massive Monokuma plush behind the counter.

Hinata narrowed his eyes. “Is that thing seriously supposed to be a bear?”

“I don’t like how it’s looking at me, Hinata.” Komaeda shivered. “This creature is disgusting.”

“Hideous,” Hinata agreed.

“Practically *despair-inducing*.”

Hinata raised an eyebrow. “We’re going to win it, right?”

“Obviously,” replied Komaeda.

They went through all the classic games: Street Fighter (Hinata won), Mario Kart (Komaeda won), and Skee-ball (a tie, as Komaeda had accidentally jammed the machine.) Komaeda even talked him into playing Dance Dance Revolution, a challenge Hinata begrudgingly accepted, if only because Saionji had already made him do it 100 times before.

Eventually, they made their way over to the Wheel of Fortune - a game entirely up to chance. You would pull a lever and watch the wheel spin, just hoping you would land on one of the slices with more tickets.

Komaeda turned towards Hinata, raising an expectant eyebrow. "Do you think it counts as cheating if I take this one?"

"Nah. Most of these games are rigged anyways," Hinata replied easily. "If you think about it, you're kind of... evening out the playing field."

With a nod, Komaeda slid a coin into the machine. "I guess even my talent is useful for something every once in a while." He smiled to himself, then put his hand on the lever. "Let's get lucky."

The wheel began to spin, and Hinata watched it go around and around. It seemed like it was going to land on the despairingly empty slice, the one with zero tickets - but at the last second, it tipped forwards again onto a tiny, barely-there slice labeled 'Ticket Jackpot.' Immediately, hundreds of tickets began pouring out of the machine. Komaeda struggled to pick them up, awkwardly looping the giant strip around his arms.

Hinata laughed out loud. "Man, I seriously need to take you to these places more often."

Komaeda looked up, tickets wrapped around his whole body. "You- what?"

He paused his attempts to disentangle himself from the loops of tickets, standing in the middle of the arcade with tickets hanging across his body, head tilted sideways, and *fine*, Hinata thought. Okay. He was kind of charming. Just a little bit.

He shook his head slightly, bringing himself back to reality. "C'mon, dude. Let me help you out."

They traded in all their tickets for the giant Monokuma plushie, and with the few left over, Hinata got a souvenir keychain. Not that he even had house keys, or car keys, or anywhere to actually put it. He would probably just end up keeping it in the back of some drawer in his dorm.

That didn't make it any less nice to have.

They left the arcade soon after that. Komaeda had balanced the Monokuma stuffed animal on his back, and he kept readjusting it as they walked down the street.

"The car is probably fine by now, right?" Komaeda asked, shuffling the plushie in his arms. "We could keep driving. Maybe still get to Miyagi by tonight."

"I guess," said Hinata. The thing was, Komaeda was right - the car was good to go, and probably had been for a while. But right here, right now, he didn't feel like leaving just yet.

He felt - unburdened, he supposed. Like he no longer had to hold the weight of the world on his shoulders. Away from Hope's Peak, traveling across the country, no obligations besides getting home - he felt more *himself* that he had in a really, really long time.

It didn't matter why, he told himself, and it didn't matter how. He didn't need to think about it. It was summer. He was happy. That was all.

He looked up at Komaeda, his face cast in shadows from the fading sunset and the dim street lights above. "Do you wanna get dinner first?" he asked.

Komaeda stumbled just a bit, then stood up straight. His eyes darted to Hinata's face, just for a second, before he looked away and bit his lip.

(Hinata wished he would stop doing that. It made it difficult to pay attention to what he was saying.)

"...Yes." Komaeda smiled at the ground. "I would like that very much."

They walked across the Kaiunbashi Bridge to get dinner, some diner-style place near the edge of town. The food was good (Hinata even convinced Komaeda to try a milkshake, now that he knew they weren't made with lard), and once again, Hinata was struck by the weird amount of *fun* he was having with Komaeda. When he'd offered the olive branch of friendship, he honestly hadn't expected it to be received so... genuinely. There was something real here. He could feel it.

Hinata had just finished calculating the tip when he glanced over the table, noticing Komaeda focused on something near the edge of the restaurant.

He was looking at a small jukebox near the back wall. It had been playing old music all night, a few other customers occasionally going over and picking songs. At some point, an old couple had gotten up and started slow dancing, a shameless display of love in some tiny corner of the world.

"...Jealous?" Hinata asked, breaking Komaeda's focus.

"Hm?" Komaeda turned back to him quickly, but he wasn't quite making eye contact.

"I hate to break it to you, buddy, but I think he's a little old for you," Hinata continued, teasing.

"It's not *that*," Komaeda muttered. "It's just... I've never- you know." He fiddled with the sleeve of his shirt. "Danced with someone."

Hinata raised his eyebrows, surprised. "What, not even at any of those fancy Ultimates-only dances Hope's Peak threw ten times a year?"

"You really think someone would be pathetic enough to dance with me?" Komaeda just shook his head. "And by the way, those dances were *meant* to be Ultimates-only. If I recall correctly, you and the younger Kuzuryu snuck into most of them regardless."

"And break school rules? Komaeda, I would *never*," Hinata replied, feigning shock.

Komaeda looked up, meeting his eyes. "I know you remember them just as well as I do."

Hinata shrugged in admission, his mind drifting to all of the dances he and Natsumi *may or may not* have illicitly attended.

There was one in particular that stuck out to him. It had been sometime in their second year, near the end of autumn. Natsumi had just gone off to dance with some upperclassman, shooting Hinata an exaggerated wink as she left him standing against the gym wall. He snorted, gave her an encouraging thumbs up, and took a sip of his punch as he looked out over the dance floor.

A slow song had just started, and people were starting to couple up all around the room. There was Sonia and Tanaka, who had just gotten together that Halloween. Ibuki was swaying an embarrassed Tsumiki all around the dance floor. Even Owari and Nidai were there, though he couldn't quite tell if they were dancing or just flat-out wrestling.

Hinata took another sip of his punch, tapping his foot along to the music, and that was when Komaeda had slid in next to him.

"You're not supposed to be here, Reserve Course," he'd said, leaning back against the wall and tilting up his chin. "Did you not see the sign, or are you too stupid to know how to read?"

Hinata just rolled his eyes. "Don't you get tired of repeating this little speech at every dance I come to?"

"Well, the message clearly hasn't sunk in yet if you keep coming back."

"Guess not. Don't give up, though. Maybe next time you'll convince me," he deadpanned.

Komaeda narrowed his eyes. "I just don't know why you insist on it. It's not as if you have a date keeping you here."

Hinata raised his eyebrows. "And I can't wait to meet *your* date, Komaeda."

Komaeda shot him a scowl, then turned his face forwards with a small "hmp" sound. Hinata looked up at the dance floor too, taking the last sip of his drink before tossing it in the trash.

Looking back on it now, Hinata thought that there really was no reason for Komaeda to have come over to talk to him. It seemed like he had only been pestering him because he was lonely.

"...I would probably be a horrible dancer. If I had a date, I mean," Komaeda had said eventually, barely loud enough to be heard over the music. "Not as bad as you, though. Obviously."

"Sure, *obviously*. Remind me which one of us tripped down the stairs last week?"

"Remind *me* which one of us was actually invited here."

That had brought the conversation to an end, but Komaeda hadn't left. It hadn't made sense for him to have stayed after that. He had anyways.

Hinata sighed, just a little bit, and leaned further back against the wall. "...Y'know, I kinda like this song."

“...Yeah.” Komaeda met his eyes for a second before glancing away. “I do too.”

They didn’t speak at all after that, just watched the dance floor in silence. Eventually, a pretty blue-haired girl had approached Hinata, gesturing to some red-haired guy who, in retrospect, had almost 100% been Leon Kuwata. *Small world.*

“Hi,” she’d said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “I know we haven’t met, and I’m sorry to introduce myself like this, but I really, really need to make that guy jealous. Will you dance with me?”

Hinata shrugged and offered out his arm. “Sure, I’ve always wanted to be the other woman.”

She grinned brightly, wrapping her hands around his bicep and pulling him towards the dance floor. “Oh, you’ll do *very* nicely.”

“I’m Hajime Hinata, by the way,” he said, letting her guide him to the center.

She stopped, then turned to face him and looped her hands around his shoulders. “Sayaka Maizono.”

He went to put his hands around her waist, then paused. “Like, *the* Sayaka Maizono?”

“Could be,” she said with a small, knowing laugh.

Hinata, trying to ignore the fact that he was dancing with a worldwide celebrity, put his hands around her waist, just a little bit awkward. They danced together for the rest of the song, and he remembered very deliberately not looking in Komaeda’s direction. When the dance was over, she’d whispered a small ‘*thank you*’ in his ear before dashing off into the crowd. Hinata had started back towards the wall, but by the time he got there, Komaeda was already gone.

Back in the present, Hinata shook himself out of the memory. He looked back at Komaeda, saying, “You are *not* getting out of high school without experiencing at least one awkward slow dance.”

Komaeda raised his eyebrows slowly. “Like *you’re* going to show me?”

“Well, who else?” Hinata shrugged.

“You- you’re serious about this?” Komaeda went from smug to embarrassed in a second. “I can’t actually- I mean, I’m going to be *horrible*.”

“I thought you said I’d be even worse.”

Komaeda paused. “Hm. I suppose I did.”

“The point isn’t to be good at it, anyways. It’s about- I dunno. The experience. You’re not gonna, like, embarrass me, or whatever.”

“...As if you need *my* help to embarrass yourself.”

“And, he’s back.” Hinata got out of his seat and offered his hand to Komaeda. “Let’s dance.”

Komaeda stood up and took his hand, but his eyes were still focused on the ground. “Not... in front of everyone.”

Hinata nodded, then tilted his head towards a side door, leading them out onto a small wooden porch off the back of the restaurant. The fluorescent light overhead was warm, casting a soft golden hue over everything, and it flickered every so often as if it was about to go out. He could still hear the music from the jukebox inside, some old slow song he vaguely recognized, a melody reaching somewhere inside his chest and pulling at his heartstrings.

Komaeda turned around to face him, his green eyes ringed with gold in the light. “You better not step on my feet, Reserve Course.”

Hinata just laughed, and Komaeda gave him a small, sly smile, like it was a joke they were both in on.

“So there’s...” Hinata hesitated awkwardly. “There’s no set way to do this, cause we’re both guys.”

“Oh, are we? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Yeah, yeah. Do you wanna lead or follow?”

Komaeda shrugged, then placed his hands carefully on Hinata’s waist, so light it was like he was asking permission to touch. “Well, I *am* taller.”

“By *one inch*,” Hinata muttered. He wrapped his hands around Komaeda’s shoulders anyways. “Now just kinda... sway along to the music, I guess. It would usually be louder, but we’ll work with what we’ve got.”

Komaeda’s hands tightened, just a little, on Hinata’s waist. “I can still hear it.”

They were standing, they were swaying, and then they were dancing. It was just as awkward as any other slow dance, really - Hinata didn’t know how close to stand, whether or not to look Komaeda in the eyes. Komaeda seemed to be having the same issue; his gaze kept shifting up and down, as if he wasn’t quite sure where to look. He seemed almost ethereal in the dim light, the ends of his disheveled hair glowing like a halo around his head, and it was hard to tell, but Hinata was almost certain he was blushing.

Then Komaeda’s eyes met his, and *oh, shit, he’d been staring*. He kept the contact, looking at Komaeda and moving just a bit closer, and that was... nice. The music was soft, but it was still overwhelming, and it was almost as if Komaeda’s hands on his waist were the only things keeping him tied down to earth.

He didn’t know how long it has been when the song ended - he was just jolted back to awareness, faraway crickets the only thing breaking the silence. Hastily, he took his hands off Komaeda and shoved them back into his pockets. (And from the corner of his eye, he saw Komaeda do the same.)

“And, uh, yeah.” He scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the porch. “That’s slow dancing.”

“That was... very generous of you, to do that with someone like me,” Komaeda said quietly. His voice was barely louder than the crickets.

Hinata shrugged and kept his eyes trained on the floor. “Yeah, well. Like I said. I couldn’t let you leave high school without one of the quintessential stupid experiences.”

He couldn’t see Komaeda, but he could feel the way he hesitated before saying, “...I never thought I would get to dance with anyone at all.”

Hinata looked at him carefully. “Course you will. And probably somewhere better than behind a restaurant, too.”

“I don’t know.” Komaeda glanced up, then quickly back at the floor. “I kind of thought this was nice.”

Hinata’s chest felt tight. “Yeah,” he said, and he didn’t know why his voice sounded close to cracking. “It kind of was.”

And they were back on the road, two boys in the front seat, an oversized Monokuma plush in the back. Hinata only drove for a short distance before pulling off at the first hotel he saw. He was *tired*, okay? And he would just... make up for lost time tomorrow.

Komaeda’s luck must have been taking a break, because they were able to get a room with two beds. Hinata wouldn’t even have minded sharing again, really, but there was absolutely no way he was going to request something like that - especially when he didn’t know how Komaeda would react. So whatever. Hinata got his own bed. And he was *not* disappointed by that fact. Not at all. Clearly.

He leaned back against the headboard with a sigh, slouching against the pillows and closing his phone. He spared a glance over at the other bed; Komaeda was staring down at the book Hinata had give him, his eyes flicking across the words as he read. He occasionally nodded along as he trailed his flipped from page to page, and he was smiling just a little bit.

Hinata looked away quickly, trying to hide his grin - which was *only* because he was celebrating that his gift had been a success, and not at all because he kind of liked Komaeda's smile.

Luckily, he didn’t have to think anymore about that; his phone started buzzing in his hand, startling him out of his thoughts. He didn’t even look at the caller ID before he answered it, just tapped accept and put it to his ear.

“Hey,” said a soft voice, video game sound effects in the distant background of the call.

“Nanami,” Hinata said, letting out a sigh of relief. “Of course. Hi.”

There was a muted explosion sound effect, and then; “How’s your... um... totally-not-a-road-trip going?” Nanami asked.

“Better than expected,” he replied, trying to keep his voice quiet so he wouldn’t disturb Komaeda. “It’s gonna sound weird, but it’s actually been kind of... fun.”

“That’s good. You sounded... stressed, the last time we talked, so I’m really, really happy for you.” She hummed. “So you and Komaeda are... friends now?”

He glanced over at Komaeda's bed, just for a second, before smiling and turning back. “Yeah, I guess we kinda are.”

“I’m glad,” Nanami said, warmth clear in her voice. “It’s unexpected, but I guess I should have seen it coming eventually.”

“Oh, really?”

“You guys are like... two Tetris blocks that seem like they won’t fit together, but it turns out they do.”

Hinata raised his eyebrows. “That’s deep, Nanami. You should teach Ibuki about metaphors.”

“Hm... Even I have my limits.” Nanami yawned loudly. “We all really miss you over here, though.”

Hinata grinned. “Oh, yeah? Has Soda cried about me yet?”

“He told me he’s thinking of building a little robot version of you to keep us company,” Nanami said, clearly amused.

“Wow. I’m flattered. And just a little bit creeped out. But mostly flattered.”

There was another explosion sound effect, and then Nanami let out a small laugh. “Hey, d’you think you could put Komaeda on the phone for a minute? I need his luck to help me beat this final boss.”

“I really don’t think that’s how his luck works, but, well, what the hell. Go for it,” Hinata said, then turned to his side. “Hey, Komaeda. Nanami wants to talk to you.”

Komaeda looked over at him and instantly brightened, the edges of his lips curving into a small smile. “...She does?”

Hinata offered out his phone expectantly, and Komaeda quickly picked it up and gave a cheerful greeting to the other line. They spoke for a few minutes, Hinata watching as Komaeda excitedly talked to Nanami, bouncing slightly on the bed.

“She wants me to tell you she beat the game,” Komaeda said after a few minutes, turning towards Hinata. “And she says goodnight.”

“Tell her I say goodnight, too.”

“Hinata says goodnight, too.” The call ended after that, and Komaeda held out the phone for Hinata to take. “Here’s your phone back.”

"Thanks." Hinata grabbed his phone and dropped it on the bed. "How's Nanami?"

"She's good! She finally beat that game she'd been trying to beat all week in Hokkaido."

"Your weird luck probably had something to do with that."

Komaeda's eyes lit up. "Oh, absolutely! And it was an honor to be used by an Ultimate as a stepping stone to hope!"

Hinata paused, shooting him an odd look. "She actually likes you, you know."

"Well, I suppose there's no accounting for taste," Komaeda replied simply.

"...*Dude.*"

Komaeda shifted uneasily. "...I've accepted my status as an outsider, Hinata. I'm well-aware that my self-righteous thoughts drive my classmates away. It's just as well - I don't deserve to be close to them in the first place."

"I think most of them would like you if you calmed down a bit and let them actually get to know you." Hinata shrugged. "I mean, it worked for me."

"It... did?" Komaeda asked slowly, looking at him with wide green eyes.

Hinata nodded. "Next trip I'll bribe the bus driver to leave you and, like, Soda behind. You'll become friends in no time, I swear."

Komaeda laughed, genuine and almost giddy. "Looking forward to it, Hinata."

Hinata set his phone on his bedside table, then turned back to Komaeda. "Are you tired?"

"Not really." Komaeda leaned back against his pillows. "I've been sleeping... better than normal, recently."

Hinata felt the same way, but there was no way he was going to admit it out loud, so he just said: "Oh, yeah. I'm sure my snoring puts you right to sleep."

The edges of Komaeda's eyes crinkled when he smiled. "That *must* be it."

"D'you wanna watch a movie, or something? While we have time?" Hinata asked. Komaeda didn't respond for a moment, just looked at him strangely, so he started to backpedal. "You can pick. As long as you don't pick anything weird. Or we don't have to watch anything, I guess, it was just a suggestion-"

"Wait, I-" Komaeda looked up hopefully. "I'd like to."

The hotel TV offered a variety of movies, and Hinata craned his neck to see the screen as Komaeda clicked through them. The setup of the hotel was somewhat unfortunate; Hinata could barely see the TV from his bed, whereas Komaeda had the screen basically right in front of him. He sighed, then stood up.

“Ah, Hinata?” Komaeda looked up at him, confused.

“I can’t see the TV from my bed,” he grumbled, sliding in next to Komaeda on his bed. “I don’t even know why they make hotel rooms like this.”

They settled on some murder mystery, which was beginning to become a theme for them. Apparently the lead girl had been the Ultimate Actress at Hope’s Peak a couple years ago, much to Komaeda’s enjoyment. The lead actor, though, was terrible, and they spent half the movie just mocking him. But the other half, at least for Hinata, was spent trying to ignore how close to Komaeda he’d gotten. They *really* had to crowd together to see the TV. Whenever he moved his hand, his arm brushed against Komaeda’s. Their legs knocked against each other, and he could almost feel Komaeda’s pulse through his skin.

Of course, the movie had to end at some point. As the screen went dark and the credits started rolling, Hinata yawned, then looked over at Komaeda. “We should... definitely sleep now.”

“Right.” For some reason, Komaeda’s posture had gone stiff. “We should get on the road as early as possible tomorrow.”

“Mhm. Whatever you say,” he mumbled, yawning again. It took him an embarrassing amount of effort to pry himself away from Komaeda’s side and walk the whole three feet to his bed. He turned off the TV on his way, then crawled onto the mattress and sank into the pillows.

But even after pulling the blankets over himself, Hinata still felt strangely cold, his bed strangely empty. He rolled over to look at Komaeda, who wasn’t even that far away from him - but somehow, the gap between their beds felt like more than a mile instead of barely a yard.

Their eyes met, just for a second; green against hazel, barely even visible with the small sliver of slight coming from the window. Komaeda’s eyes instantly went wide, and Hinata could feel his own do the same. They turned away almost in unison, quickly pretending nothing had happened at all.

Hinata closed his eyes, desperately trying to will himself asleep. And in the dark, with his eyes shut tight, he could almost pretend that he didn’t wish Komaeda was there with him.

Chapter End Notes

btw the places they visit are Ishiwari Zakura, Hoonji Temple, and Mitsuishi Shrine!! and the song they dance to can be whatever you imagine, but i like to think it’s Plastic Love by Mariya Takeuchi.

day 6

Chapter Summary

Hinata comes to an unfortunate realization.

Komaeda was already awake by the time Hinata opened his eyes.

He was sitting cross-legged on his own bed, fully dressed and reading the book Hinata had gotten him. Komaeda's gaze flickered from page to page, eyes lighting up as he read, and he was biting his lip in concentration. His shirt was slightly rumpled, and his hair was even more unruly than usual. The warm morning sun was shining through in between the blinds, illuminating him in lines of burning light. Hinata watched as Komaeda reached up to tuck a lock of hair behind his ear, and that's when he saw the the faded ink of his own name was still scrawled on Komaeda's palm -- it somehow hadn't washed off yet.

For some reason, that made Hinata blush, color rising to his cheeks. He felt hot all over, like there was something warm blooming in his chest, and his whole face was red.

And that was the moment Komaeda chose to look over from his book, his gaze darting over towards Hinata.

Who, of course, was already looking at him. Komaeda startled backwards, knocking the book off his lap, then nervously glanced back up. "I wasn't watching you sleep," he said quickly.

"...Never said you were." Hinata pushed himself up on his hands, blinking sleep from his eyes. "You didn't wake me up?"

Komaeda began fiddling with the edge of his sheets. "Um. Sorry, Hinata. I know you must want to hurry this trip along, but you looked so tired. I felt bad about disturbing you, so I let you sleep- ah, but perhaps that inconvenienced you even more!"

Hinata looked at him curiously. "I don't mind. I just thought you wanted to get out of here early, is all. You said so last night."

Komaeda frowned. "...That wasn't what I meant," he said, sounding a bit frustrated. Hinata waited for him to elaborate, but he stayed quiet.

So, with a sigh, Hinata stepped onto the floor, wincing slightly at how cold it was. "I'll get dressed, and then we can leave," he said, walking towards the bathroom.

Komaeda stayed quiet for a moment, but right as Hinata got to the door, he chimed, "Be safe!"

Hinata's eyebrows knotted up in confusion. "...I'll try my best," he said, and then closed the bathroom door behind him.

After combing through his hair with his fingers and quickly brushing his teeth, Hinata threw on his clothes. He didn't know why he was hurrying so much - their checkout time wasn't for another couple hours. Komaeda was just being weird about leaving, but really, what was Komaeda *not* weird about?

He didn't want to let Komaeda down, though. He knew that much. So, with one final glance in the mirror, Hinata returned to the room, backpack already slung over his shoulder.

They stopped in the lobby for lukewarm coffee and picked up another map while they were there, seeing as they'd almost definitely lost the last one. After that, it was a short walk to the parking lot. Hinata unlocked the car and swung himself into the driver's seat, and on the other side, Komaeda hopped into the passenger's. The giant Monokuma plushie was still in the backseat, because *where the hell else would they put it*.

"We can probably get to Iwaki today, if you drive well enough," Komaeda said, eyes flicking across the map in his hands.

Hinata turned to the passenger seat, eyebrows raised. "Stop giving me bad directions and we actually might."

Komaeda smiled at him, just a little bit smug, and whatever weird, embarrassed feeling had come over Hinata that morning instantly vanished. He leaned back in his seat, letting out an inexplicable sigh of relief.

The feeling came back as soon as they reached the highway. It started as a tightness in his chest, escalating to fucking heart palpitations whenever Komaeda would so much as glance *near* him.

Hinata tightened his grip on the wheel and kept his eyes forwards.

But the highway was basically empty, there wasn't much around to look at, and the only thing in the background was the staticky hum of whatever was playing on the radio. He found his mind drifting back to Komaeda immediately, his eyes drifting right back to the passenger seat.

Komaeda was leaning back against the seat with his feet kicked up on the dashboard, because he was apparently incapable of sitting in a car like a normal person. Hinata's eyes swept over his long legs and slightly bruised knees before quickly turning his eyes back to the road. As he swerved into the next lane, his throat felt dry.

He told himself it didn't mean anything, then wondered why he'd had to *keep* telling himself that so often lately.

Hinata turned up the radio, and this time, he refused to look away from the road at all.

“500 yen says they play a Sayaka Maizono song next,” Komaeda called. They’d been driving for a while now, and Hinata had used that time to wrangle his feelings back into his chest and stamp them down, down, down.

With a pause, Hinata considered the offer. They were listening to a rock station, so the chances had to be basically zero. He grinned. “You’re on.”

Of course, the first song that played was by the one and only Ibuki Mioda - *featuring* Sayaka Maizono. The two had somehow melded death metal and bubblegum pop together into one song somewhere in the middle, which actually worked weirdly well.

Hinata’s face immediately dropped to a scowl - he should have known by now that odds didn’t mean a thing with Komaeda. “...I don’t know why I still make bets with you,” he muttered.

Komaeda just laughed. “Don’t worry, Hinata. I’ll just take the money from your wallet later!”

“That is not as comforting as you think it is.” Hinata yawned, then quickly refocused on the road ahead of him. Maybe Komaeda had been right about him seeming tired.

“Do you want the rest of my coffee?” Komaeda offered, then suddenly recoiled. “Not that you’d want to drink from the same cup as me, of course, that would be disgusting-”

Hinata just sighed. “...Hand it over.”

Komaeda seemed to be shocked into silence. “...Really?” he asked, his voice rising slightly.

Hinata shrugged. “Yeah. I didn’t sleep well, I guess.” He held out his hand, and hesitantly, Komaeda handed him the coffee cup.

After taking a long, slow sip, Hinata put the coffee back in the cupholder, glancing over for a second to know where to put it. He saw that Komaeda was staring at him, stunned into silence, and Hinata seriously needed to get his eyes checked, because it almost seemed like Komaeda was *embarrassed*.

“It’s like an indirect kiss,” Komaeda said quietly, and Hinata nearly spit out the coffee.

The feeling in his chest was back.

And this time, it was worse.

They stopped for lunch in Sendai. Komaeda didn’t say a thing about ‘speeding up the trip,’ or whatever, which Hinata thought must have been a good sign. After lunch, they walked around for a bit; they saw a figure skating monument and a statue of some American baseball player before returning to the car.

On the way out, Hinata almost stopped the car in the middle of the road; as he drove up the street, a giant white statue of a woman had begun to reveal itself from over the horizon. As he

drove closer, the statue seemed to be close to 100 meters tall, reaching all the way up into the sky.

“Woah,” Hinata murmured, craning his neck to get a better look.

“It’s the Sendai Daikannon,” Komaeda explained breathlessly. “She’s a goddess of mercy. It’s very lucky that we’ve stumbled upon this statue... such a hopeful sight...!”

“Yeah. It’s... incredible.” Hinata glanced over at the passenger seat. “You know a lot about this stuff, huh?”

Komaeda nodded. “My family used to travel a lot when I was young. I’ve been all over Japan, and to a lot of other countries, too.”

Hinata grinned at him, then pulled up at the red light and grabbed his camera from his backpack. “Stoplight. Here, smile.”

Komaeda looked a little bewildered, but he quickly ducked down, a bit awkward, to get into frame with the statue. Hinata snapped the photo, then tossed his bag into the backseat as soon as the light turned green.

They’d been back on the road for just over an hour when Hinata saw the lake. Just as the car rounded a bend through the trees, the glistening blue water had nearly blinded him. He glanced out the window, marveling at the sight.

“D’you think we can get down there?” he asked suddenly.

Komaeda sat up in the passenger seat. “Do you want to?”

“Yeah. It looks cool.”

“I’m sure there’s a way,” Komaeda replied. “But with your driving skills, we’re probably going to end up in the lake.”

Hinata raised his eyebrows. “Only if you’re the one giving me directions.”

They found a dirt road turn-off a couple hundred yards up, carefully directing the car until he found a place to park along the side. Hinata pulled the car over just under the shade of some trees, looking right out onto the whole lake.

Swinging his backpack over his shoulder, he stepped out of the car and started walking towards the water, Komaeda following close behind.

They strolled along the edge of the lake for a bit, taking in the view. After a while, Hinata stopped, kneeling down to look at the rocks covering the small beach. After finding a flat enough stone, he stood back up, took aim, and tossed it carefully at the lake. It skipped two times across the surface before sinking down, and Hinata pumped his fist in the air before finding another stone.

He skipped a couple more rocks before he realized Komaeda was watching him. Looking up, he met the other boy's searching gaze. A slight blush had risen to Komaeda's face - *probably just surprised the Reserve Course student knew how to do anything*, Hinata concluded with a slight roll of his eyes.

He picked up a flat rock and offered it to Komaeda. "Your turn."

Komaeda's hand hesitated over his. "...I don't know how."

"What, you've never skipped rocks before?"

Komaeda just shook his head wordlessly.

"Here. I'll show you." Hinata picked up another rock and folded it into Komaeda's hand. "Follow my lead." He got his hand in the right position, then turned to Komaeda. "Hold it flat with your thumb, like this." He hooked his pointer finger around the edge. "Then throw it straight!" He watched proudly as his rock skipped three times before sinking.

Komaeda slowly mimicked his movement, but he ended up throwing the rock straight into the water. It laded with a small splash and sank immediately.

Hinata laughed, warmth filling his chest. "Holy shit."

Komaeda smiled back at him, amused. "That was terrible, wasn't it?"

"Just a little." Hinata grinned and handed him another stone. "I'll help you. Here." He wrapped his own hand around Komaeda's. Komaeda froze for a moment before letting Hinata adjust his fingers into the right position. "Now throw it, okay?"

Komaeda threw his rock exactly the way Hinata had shown him, and it skipped across the water until Hinata couldn't see it anymore.

"Like that, Hinata?" Komaeda was smiling, but there was a teasing edge to his voice.

"That was perfect and you know it, you dick." Hinata snorted, only a little bit annoyed.

They continued skipping stones for a while, and Hinata watched in amusement as Komaeda's either sank straight into the water or disappeared all the way out into the horizon.

"I've got a question for you," Hinata started, leaning against his backpack. They'd made their way over to the end of a wooden dock, sitting at the edge to dip their feet in the cool water of the lake. "What do you want to do after you graduate high school?"

From the space next to him, Komaeda hesitated. "...I'm not sure. For someone like me, living in the real world will be... difficult, to say the least."

Hinata kicked his feet in the water, nodding just a little bit. "I don't really know what I want to do, either."

“And I’m sure the Reserve Course isn’t exactly *helpful* in that department,” Komaeda said, rolling his eyes. “It seems like they just overwork you, use you for your money, then leave you to fend for yourselves.”

Hinata furrowed his brow at Komaeda -- that had been seriously unexpected. It almost seemed like Komaeda had redirected his vitriol towards Reserve Course students at a new target: The administration. And *that* was something Hinata could agree with. “You don’t even know the half of it,” he sighed. “They’re basically just setting us up to become average, boring office drones.”

Komaeda looked at him curiously. “And that isn’t what you want?”

“No,” Hinata said. “I want to do- *something*. I don’t know what yet. I just want it to be important.” He bit his lip. “Sounds kinda stupid when I say it out loud, I guess.”

“I don’t think it sounds stupid,” Komaeda insisted. “And- I don’t know. Maybe you’ll actually be able to do it.”

Hinata bit his lip to keep himself from smiling. “You- um.” He looked down to hide his face. “You really think that?”

“Sure.” The edges of Komaeda’s lips twitched up. “I mean, you’ve never been good at following rules.”

“*Hey*,” Hinata laughed, then glanced up. “...You’re gonna have a good life too, Komaeda. No matter what you end up doing.”

Komaeda froze, almost stricken, before quickly looking away. “...I don’t know. I don’t think my luck would allow for it. And even if it did...” He hesitated. “...I never- well. I never thought I’d live past high school, so I never had to realistically consider my future before now.”

Hinata sat up nervously. “You never thought you’d...?”

Komaeda took a deep breath, like he was preparing himself for something. “When I was in my last year of middle school, I got the diagnosis. Stage 3 malignant lymphoma.” He said casually, as if he wasn’t breaking Hinata’s world apart right then and there. “And to top it off, it was accompanied by frontotemporal dementia.”

Hinata felt his chest tighten. “Komaeda, I-”

“But it’s alright! Right after I was diagnosed, I was accepted into Hope’s Peak. I thought that was lucky enough, but I was so fortunate that some of the Ultimates were actually able to treat it. I’m in remission now.” His eyes were trained on the dock, tapping his fingers against the wood. “But, well. There was a short time when I truly believed I was going to die, so I was- planning my own funeral, sort of, in my head. The flowers, the coffin, the location. Then I got to the guests, and this part’s the kicker.” A morbid smile spread across his face. “I couldn’t think of a single person to invite.”

“...Not one?” Hinata asked. He looked at Komaeda carefully, not trusting himself to say anything else.

Komaeda nodded. “No family, no friends, not even any acquaintances.”

“...Wow.”

“Yeah.”

Hinata swallowed. “Just so you know, Komaeda. I would go to your funeral.”

Komaeda let out a short, empty laugh. “Would you believe that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me?”

“...*Dude*,” Hinata said, because it was the only thing he could say without getting choked up.

Komaeda trailed his finger along the surface of the water. “I think that was the first time in my life I realized how truly lonely I was,” he said, a bit quieter than before. “Because of my self-righteous thoughts, everyone distanced themselves from me. And I was fine with that when I was still healthy, but I realized that it was quite lonely to die alone.” His voice was wavering. “And when I was on the verge of death, I finally realized what I’d wanted all along: Somebody’s love.” He froze, sitting up ramrod-straight on the dock. “Anyways. That’s not the point. I just... don’t really tell people. All it would do is create unnecessary, undeserved sympathy.” He looked down. “And besides - my social skills aren’t exactly what you would call *stellar*, but even I know terminal illness isn’t a great conversation starter.”

Hinata’s chest felt like it was caving in on itself. He looked right at Komaeda, trying to put as much warmth as possible into his expression. “Well... thanks for telling me, at least.”

Komaeda turned to look at him, eyes wide. “You’re seriously thanking me for burdening you with my feelings?”

Hinata shrugged. “You feel better, right?”

“Yes, but now you feel *worse*,” Komaeda stressed.

“I really don’t,” Hinata said, then hesitated. “...This is what you were talking about a few days ago, wasn’t it? How you’re sure you’ll die because of your luck.”

Komaeda nodded. “Something like that, yes. If it’s not my illness, it’ll almost certainly be something else.”

Hinata hesitated, searching for the right words. “But you were- you were so sure you were going to die *alone*, too. And I want you to know that you don’t have to.”

“...Oh.” Komaeda said, quiet. “Has it occurred to you that maybe I’m just getting what I deserve?”

“I know who you are,” Hinata said, and he wanted Komaeda to know he meant it. “And it isn’t this.”

He reached for Komaeda's hand, laying against the wooden slats of the dock. Komaeda instantly went still, and Hinata was momentarily terrified he'd fucked up before Komaeda slotted their fingers together, holding on to Hinata's hand so tight it almost hurt. Hinata squeezed back, like it was some sort of reassurance he was still there.

"You're not gonna pretend this was all the plot of a book again, right?" he asked after a moment.

Komaeda tapped his finger against their joined hands. "Hm, no. I'm sure you'd just call me on it like you did last time."

"Damn right I would."

Komaeda actually laughed at that, and Hinata smiled back, relieved. They stayed there like that for a moment: hands interlocked, sunlight warming their skin, small waves lapping at their feet.

Eventually, Komaeda let go. Hinata's hand felt cold as he watched Komaeda pull away.

"We should probably start heading back now," Komaeda started, hesitant. He stood up, pulling his feet from the water and dusting off his shorts. "I'll--"

But as soon as his feet hit the dock, he slipped. Hinata moved to catch him, but it was too late -- Komaeda had already tumbled back, crashing straight into the water.

He splashed back up to the surface after a short moment, wet hair covering his eyes as he started to tread water. Hinata let out an involuntary laugh, covering his mouth when Komaeda looked up at him.

"Wow, Hinata is laughing at my pain?" Komaeda pushed his hair out of his face, glaring up at Hinata from the lake. "I guess the Reserve Course fails to teach even basic human empathy..."

"Aw, don't be mad," Hinata snorted, rolling his eyes. The tight feeling in his chest was back, this time tenfold. "I'll help you out."

He reached down to take Komaeda's hand, and Komaeda reached up from the water to meet it. Their fingers interlocked, and immediately Hinata found himself being pulled forwards, tumbling straight into the lake.

He was submerged in a rush of cold water for a moment before kicking back up to the surface. He took a deep breath, then wiped the water from his eyes to glare at Komaeda.

"Whoops," Komaeda said, not sounding like he meant any bit of it.

Hinata immediately splashed him in the face. Komaeda let out a surprised laugh, then kicked away and tried to splash him back. Hinata dove under the surface to get away, relaxing into the feel of water; it was the perfect temperature for such a warm day, cool and blue and refreshing.

They spent a while like that, swimming and chasing each other around the shallows of the lake. Eventually Komaeda caught up with him, splashing him right in the face with a well-aimed kick.

“Okay, okay!” Hinata laughed, pushing back his hair. “Truce?” he offered, looking back at Komaeda.

Komaeda seemed to take a moment to catch his breath, then nodded. “Truce.”

And when he smiled, it reached his eyes. They were so green they almost glowed against the azure blue of the water. Small droplets of water clung to his dark eyelashes, dripping down his throat and pooling at his collarbone. His shirt was completely soaked in water and practically glued to his chest.

Hinata dove back into the water just so he wouldn’t have to look at him anymore.

They left the lake just as the sun started setting, climbing back up onto the sun-warm slats of the wooden dock. Hinata took the ladder first, then turned around to take Komaeda’s hand and help him up, too. *Just because Komaeda was too clumsy for his own good*, he told himself as he tightened his grip.

He could feel Komaeda’s hand gripping his tightly. He could almost feel Komaeda’s heart beating under his skin.

As soon as Komaeda was off the ladder, Hinata dropped his hand. It was too much. Too much, and he didn’t know why.

Hinata picked up his backpack from the dock, then slid his shoes back on before he hit the dirt. From behind him, Komaeda followed his lead. They walked back up to the car, still parked beneath the half-shade of some trees on the old dirt road. The air had started to cool off as the sun kept sinking below the lake, setting off a wave of twinkling gold reflection on the water’s surface. Crickets had started to chirp from the surrounding forest. Hinata felt the last rays of sun hit his face as he looked out over the lake.

Through some kind of unspoken mutual agreement, Hinata and Komaeda both awkwardly changed into dry clothes on either side of the car, a solid barrier between them. After rolling up his sleeves, Hinata leaned in over the car towards Komaeda, bracing his body against it as he dried his hair off with an old t-shirt.

"By the way, thanks for pulling me into the water, asshole." Hinata rolled his eyes, sarcastic, but even he could hear the fondness seeping into his voice.

Komaeda looked over the car at him, smug. "You are so *very* welcome, Hinata." He grinned, then ducked down to swing himself into the passenger seat.

Hinata stayed where he was for one more moment, looking back out at the lake.

He’d seen a lot of things on this trip he thought he might not ever see for the rest of his life. Places he’d probably never come back to. Strangers he might never meet again. A new

prefecture every night, a new city every day.

Hinata wondered, for a moment, if he would still remember all of this after he graduated. Honestly, he almost wished he wouldn't. If he could get over the trip that easily, that meant it wasn't as monumental as it felt right now.

But the truth was, he didn't think anything will ever be able to really knock him off his feet again. Not like this, anyways.

He dug around in his backpack to find the camera, then quickly snapped a photo of the lake.

Komaeda pushed open the driver's side door, reaching across the seat. "You coming?" he asked.

Hinata looked down. "Yeah, yeah." He pulled the door open all the way and climbed into the driver's seat.

He was about to put away the camera when Komaeda pointed to it and asked, "Can I see that for a second?"

"What, the camera?" Hinata shrugged, handing it to him. "Sure, I guess."

Komaeda held up the camera, closing one eye to look through the viewfinder. "Smile!" he chimed, and he barely gave Hinata any time to react before he snapped a picture.

Hinata just laughed, snatching the camera back from Komaeda to see the picture. It was kind of blurry, and the sunset lighting in the background made the photo a bit dark, but he *was* smiling.

He still was.

"Was, um." Komaeda hesitated, shuffling back in the passenger seat. "Was that okay?"

"Yeah, Komaeda," Hinata said, sincere. "It's nice."

Hinata only drove for another half-hour before taking a random exit, too exhausted to drive for any longer. The sign told him they'd ended up in a small city called Miharu, which meant that they hadn't quite made it to Iwaki. He couldn't even pretend he was upset about it.

He drove around until he found a hotel, yawning as he pulled into the parking lot. He grabbed his stuff and climbed out of the car, watching as Komaeda did the same, before entering the hotel.

A bored-looking woman was sitting at the receptionist counter, idly tapping at the desktop computer. Hinata walked over to her, awkwardly clearing his throat to catch her attention.

She glanced up, then said, "If you're here to spend the night, I'm very sorry, but we only have one free room."

Hinata held back a sigh of relief. “That’s fine. We’ll take it,” he said gratefully.

“Hm.” The receptionist frowned pointedly. “It’s the honeymoon suite, which we typically reserve for couples.”

“...Oh.” Hinata considered his options. He didn’t want to sleep in the car, and he was far too tired to attempt a drive to another hotel; he knew what he had to do. “That’s perfect for us, then, *right?*” He glanced at Komaeda pleadingly, hoping he understood the message.

Komaeda went still for half a second before his placid smile quickly turned mischievous. He draped an arm over Hinata’s shoulders, pressing himself flush against his side, and Hinata thought that perhaps he’d received the message a little *too* clearly. “Of course, honey.” He batted his long eyelashes dramatically. “I’ve been dying to get into bed with you all day!”

Hinata let out a sudden, strangled sound from the back of his throat, trying desperately to keep the embarrassment off his face. His whole body felt like it was on fire, skin burning wherever Komaeda was touching him. “Y- You,” he tried weakly, unable to finish his sentence when he could feel Komaeda’s hair brushing against his cheek. Hinata knew he wasn’t the best actor, so he could only think of way to sell this: Over-doing it completely. He wrapped an arm around Komaeda’s waist, feeling the other boy stiffen before relaxing into him. He looked up at Komaeda, eyes mock-wide. “You say the *sweetest* things, darling,” he replied in the most syrupy tone he could muster.

Then the corners of Komaeda’s lips twitched up, as if he was trying not to laugh, and he said, “I only say what’s true, dear,” before smiling down at him, sickly-sweet and warm.

Hinata should - he should *kiss him. Yeah. That would show him, right? To kiss that self-satisfied, taunting smile off his face. That would catch him off guard for sure. He should-* In an instant, Hinata froze. This was not a path he should be going down. Especially not right now.

He jerked his gaze away from Komaeda and turned back to the receptionist. “Isn’t he *charming?*” he asked though clenched teeth. “So, uh. The room?”

“...Right,” she replied slowly, like she was still processing what she was seeing. “...You’ll be staying in Room 702. Seventh floor, first door to the right.”

Trying not to grin at his success, Hinata glanced up at Komaeda. “Can I have your credit card, sweetie?” he prompted, trying to speed through this interaction as quickly as humanly possible.

Komaeda pulled it out, but before he gave it to Hinata, he leaned in close and said, “Well, you *are* my trophy husband.”

Hinata grabbed the card from Komaeda’s hand and gave it to the receptionist, sending him a glare as soon as she turned away. She stared at them oddly as she swiped the card, but she still returned it to Hinata along with a key, which he accepted gratefully.

“Thanks,” he said. She nodded back primly, and he turned around.

They started walking towards the elevator, both of Komaeda's arms lightly wrapped around Hinata's bicep.

"Off to our love nest!" Komaeda chimed loudly as they stepped inside.

Right after the elevator doors closed, Hinata let out a long, embarrassed laugh and elbowed Komaeda lightly in the ribs. "You were making fun of me on purpose, you jerk."

"I would never make fun of you, Hinata!" Komaeda hid a smile behind his hand. "I was just playing along with *your* plan."

"It was the *only room left*," Hinata groaned, sheepish. "Don't underestimate my dedication to a good night's sleep."

The elevator doors opened just second later. Komaeda took his hands off Hinata's arm, skipping into the hallway. Hinata looked down at his bicep, swallowed, and followed Komaeda out.

Komaeda left to shower as soon as they'd settled in to the room. Hinata was glad for that, at least; it was like whoever had designed this room had spilled 'tacky Valentine's day' all over it. Everything was tinted in shades of red and pink, the bedsheets were lace and silk, and there was a fresh bouquet of roses right on the bedside table. He'd sat on the bed, because he didn't know where else to sit, but even being there was making him feel embarrassed. He honestly didn't know if he was going to be able to stay the night here with Komaeda without having a full-on heart attack.

Speaking of which, Hinata *seriously* needed to talk to someone about all the weird things he'd been feeling today. It was eating him up inside, and he still had no clue what was wrong with him.

And there was only one person Hinata would call out of the blue to deal with his emotional crisis.

He pulled his phone out of his backpack, calling the number as quickly as he could. There was only a limited amount of time before Komaeda came back, even if Komaeda's showers *were* ridiculously long. Hinata waited for the other line to pick up, and then:

"Hi, Hinata," said a soft, sleepy voice.

Hinata took a deep breath before speaking. "Hey, Nanami, I'm in kind of a, um—" He shrugged helplessly. "A weird situation. It's... hard to explain."

"What about it is weird?" Nanami asked.

Hinata looked up, then immediately back down. There were mirrors on the ceiling. "For starters, I'm in the honeymoon suite," he said, his voice breaking just a little bit.

"...You're *where*?"

He scrambled to explain. “Not by choice, by the way, it was just the only room left at the hotel. And Komaeda’s rich - did *you* know he was rich? - so price wasn’t really an issue. The only thing was, we had to... kind of... act like we were together to book the room. So I, uh, pretended to date him. Komaeda, I mean.”

“And that... worked?” Nanami asked, amusement dancing at the edge of her voice.

“Yeah, they actually bought it. Pretty lucky, right?” Hinata paused. “Shit, I sound like Komaeda. Maybe he really is rubbing off on me.”

“Kinky!” yelled a voice that could only belong to Ibuki.

“...Nanami,” Hinata said slowly. “Am I on speaker phone?”

She hummed. “Yeah, I think so.”

“We are very sorry, Hinata!” another voice interjected.

“*Sonia*? Is that you?” he asked unevenly. “...Nanami, how many people are there?”

“Oh, um...there’s me, Ibuki, Sonia, Mikan...”

“Please forgive us!” interrupted the nurse.

Nanami continued. “...Mahiru, Hiyoko, Peko, and Akane. It’s a... What did you call it, Ibuki?”

“Girls’ night!” Ibuki whooped in excitement. It was incredibly loud, even over the phone.

“It’s a girl’s night,” echoed Nanami confidently.

Hinata pinched the bridge of his nose. “And listening in on my *personal* phone calls is your idea of entertainment?”

“You gotta admit - it’s pretty funny, dude,” said Owari.

“More like *tragic*,” Saionji jeered.

“What they mean is, your life is very entertaining!” Sonia chimed. “Straight out of a Japanese J-Drama!”

Hinata groaned. “Nanami, I’ll call you back later, alright? Have a fun... girl’s night.”

“We will,” said Pekoyama, and then the line went dead.

Hinata shoved his phone back in his pocket and wrung his hands together, foot tapping nervously against the floor. That call hadn’t helped him solve much of anything.

Two minutes later, he called back again. Komaeda would only be gone for so long, and Hinata needed advice *now*.

“Nanami?” he said desperately.

The nervous voice on the other line crackled to life. “Chiaki is, um, getting her nails painted by Mahiru, so she can’t c-c-come to the phone right now! I’m so sorry!”

He rolled his eyes fondly. “Hi, Tsumiki.”

“H-hello, Hinata!”

Maybe it was fine that Nanami wasn’t available - Tsumiki was probably the only other person who even kind of understood Komaeda, and Hinata was about 99% sure that his problem, like most problems, was Komaeda-related. “Hey, I’m sorry to bother you, but do you mind if I talk to you about something?”

“Yes, of course, anything!” Tsumiki exclaimed.

Hinata hesitated. “...In private?”

He heard the sound of a door shutting, and the background noise quickly faded out. Tsumiki must have gone to the dorm hallway. “Um... what is it, Hinata?”

“There’s something I’d like... advice about, I guess.” He swallowed, remembering he had a time limit. “I’ve been having all these weird feelings, recently. It’s... kind of a complicated situation, and I don’t want to mess things up just because I’m... *fuck*.”

Tsumiki paused. The phone line crackled. “I’m not sure I understand?”

Hinata sighed, resigned. “Okay, if I just... tell you everything I’ve been feeling. Do you think you could tell me what’s going on?”

“So it would be like I was diagnosing you!” exclaimed Tsumiki, her voice raising in the dangerously curious way it always did when she talked about nurse stuff.

Hinata gripped the phone a bit tighter. “Uh, sure. If that’s how you wanna think about it.”

“Alright! Tell me your symptoms!”

“Symptoms,” he repeated incredulously. “Sure. I guess... I have this strange, tight feeling in my chest pretty often. Almost constantly. It gets worse when I’m close to...” He swallowed. “People. My heart beats so fast I can barely stand it. And I’ve been having a lot of weird thoughts, things I wouldn’t usually think. There’s got to be something wrong with me, right?”

Tsumiki hummed. “And are these, um, constant symptoms?”

Hinata bit his lip. “No, they only happen when I’m around... a certain person.”

“Y-you’re sure that’s what you’ve been feeling?” Tsumiki paused. “And- and it only happens around one sp-specific person?”

“Exactly,” said Hinata. He was glad that *someone* was finally taking this seriously.

“I, um, diagnose you,” she said hesitantly, “with having a crush.”

Hinata was pretty sure something had short-circuited his brain. “*Oh*,” he murmured, feeling utterly betrayed.

“H-hinata? Are you still there?” Tsumiki asked frantically. “Are you okay? Hinata, please respond!”

“...Tsumiki?” he said finally.

“Y-yes?”

“Please don’t tell anyone we had this conversation.”

“Of course not!” she squeaked.

“Cool. Okay. Thanks. I’m hanging up now,” he said. “Goodnight.”

Hinata heard a timid *goodnight* from the other line before he ended the call, jamming his finger on the button harder than had probably been necessary. He collapsed on the bed and held his phone to his chest as he stared at the ceiling. The more Hinata thought about it, the more those stupid words started to make sense.

The way he felt around Komaeda wasn’t at all like how he felt around his other friends. Around anyone else he’d ever met, really. And he’d picked up on it before - he wasn’t stupid, obviously - but it was only ever in bits and pieces, small admissions of guilt he could crush down later. Now, it was like he was finally having to confront it all at once. There was no avoiding something like this.

But there was no accepting it, either, and that was the problem. On the most basic, fundamental level, there was no chance Komaeda would ever feel the same way. It wasn’t even in the realm of possibility. Hinata was still Reserve Course. He knew that. He *knew* it, he’d always known it, so why was it so painful to think about now?

And what was Hinata even supposed to do about it, *tell him*? Their friendship already felt so fragile, and he wasn’t going to risk breaking it for something so selfish. Komaeda would probably never want to speak to him again.

So Hinata would just... forget about it. These feelings would probably disappear after their trip was over, anyways, so he might as well get a head start on it now.

Of course, any and all plans to just forget were shattered as soon as Komaeda stepped back into the room. His cheeks were still pink from the shower, his unruly hair was hanging in his eyes, and he smelled like hotel soap. There was a towel draped around his neck, and he was just wearing boxers and a t-shirt, because of course he was. It was summer. Hinata wasn’t going to make this weird. *He wasn’t*.

Without saying a thing, he grabbed his clothes and almost *ran* into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

He made himself shower on cold. Just in case.

When he got out of the shower, Komaeda was already asleep.

Hinata approached the bed slowly, not wanted to wake him up - but he paused at the edge, heat rising to his face. It was like he suddenly understood Komaeda's impulse to sleep as far away from the other person as possible. It was for different reasons, of course, but the feeling was the same.

Holding his breath, he slowly climbed into the bed, careful not to get too close to Komaeda. Hinata told himself that as long as he maintained a gap between them, everything would be fine. It *would*. Screwing his eyes shut tight, he tried to force himself to fall asleep.

Of course it didn't work. There was no way it was going to, not when Hinata knew Komaeda was in the bed next to him. He stopped himself from looking, but he could still feel the dip in the mattress, still hear his breathing.

It was like Komaeda had reached inside Hinata's body and wrapped his hands around his heart, cutting off his breath and making his chest tight. Hinata had never felt something this intense for another person before. From resentment to curiosity to pity, everything he'd ever felt for Komaeda had always been overwhelming. Now, though, it *consumed* him. He ached for something he couldn't quite name, yearned for something he knew he'd never get.

He wanted Komaeda to whisper in his ear with his stupid voice. He wanted to bury his hands in Komaeda's ridiculous messy hair. He wanted to kiss that smug smile right off Komaeda's face.

Hinata could no longer deny that he had real, actual feelings for Nagito Komaeda. He thought that it might have been the dumbest mistake he'd ever made. It might even end up killing him.

The thought was halfway terrifying and halfway exciting, and he had no idea at all what to do with any of it.

Hinata didn't think he was going to get very much sleep tonight, either.

day 7

Chapter Summary

They might have been on the cusp of something, if they weren't both so obliviously self-deprecating.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hajime Hinata had to get out of here.

This wasn't the first morning he'd woken up with Komaeda, but he was starting to think that this must have been the most embarrassing one yet. It could have been because of his realization last night, the way he *really* felt about Komaeda. It might have just been because of their position - Komaeda's back pressed against Hinata's chest, Hinata's arm wrapped around his waist, their legs tangled together underneath the sheets. In complete honesty, it was probably just a combination of both, but Hinata thought knowing why didn't make it any better.

Swallowing over the lump in his throat and pushing down the warmth in his chest, he took one last look at Komaeda, his pale figure complimented by the early morning light streaming in from the window. There was hair falling into his eyes, and Hinata almost moved to brush it away before he caught himself.

It took actual effort to remind himself he couldn't just stay here. He held his breath as he stiffly extracted his arm from around Komaeda's waist, trying desperately not to wake him up. Komaeda didn't stir, and Hinata carefully slid off the bed, then quietly placed his feet against the floor. He crept over to his backpack, grabbed his phone and some clothes, then tiptoed over to the bathroom, staying silent the whole time.

The moment as Hinata shut the door, his phone started ringing. Feeling his heart drop, he scrambled to snatch his phone from his pocket and immediately turned off the ringer, almost dropping it in his rush. He glared at the screen, which read: *Incoming call from The Infernal Lord of Fire an...*

As Hinata hit the accept button, he felt a pang of regret for letting Tanaka enter his own contact name. "Hey," he muttered, keeping his voice low.

"Greetings," The Infernal Lord of Fire and Ice himself replied. "I wanted to let you know I've cast a protection spell for you. It should help to keep you safe on your treacherous journey home."

Hinata smiled, half-touched, half-amused. "Thanks, man, that's really cool of you."

“May I inquire as to the hour of your intended return?” Tanaka asked, his deep voice crackling over the phone.

“...Tonight, I guess.” Hinata shrugged, cursing the note of reluctance that slipped into his voice. “I mean, *hopefully* tonight.”

“I look forward to meeting again,” Tanaka said, then hesitated. “Also...” he started, “the Dark Queen has informed me that you and Komaeda spent the night in the den of lovers.”

Hinata choked on his next breath. “The *what?*”

Tanaka’s voice rose, just a bit. “...The honeymoon suite?”

“No, wait, hold on, that isn’t what it sounds like-” Hinata could feel his face go red. “It was the only room left in the hotel, okay? Just a coincidence. That’s it.”

“Tch... a coincidence, you say? Wrong! I believe there are more nefarious forces at work here,” Tanaka declared.

“...*Nefarious forces?*” Hinata echoed, dumbfounded.

“Perhaps he’s a high-level incubus sent here to seduce you!”

“Tanaka, I haven’t been *seduced*,” Hinata hissed. He muttered the last word, as if Komaeda could somehow hear him through the wall.

Tanaka hummed in thought. “Well... have you ever thought about sealing the arcane pact of lips with him?”

Kissing, Hinata’s brain supplied. Despite himself, he thought back to being pinned to the ground near of the burning car, and staring at Komaeda in the lake, and his desperate attempt at acting in front of the hotel receptionist’s desk. “...Absolutely not,” he said through his teeth.

“So you’re telling me you hold no feelings of desire towards him?” Tanaka asked curiously. “And you don’t even find him attractive? Not at all?”

Hinata’s grip tightened on the phone. “*No.*”

Tanaka made a small noise of surprise. “Really? Because even the Dark Lord will admit he has a certain kind of-”

“No!” Hinata protested weakly. “None. Never. Shut up.” Hinata could tell Tanaka was about to say something else, so he cut him off before he could. “And by the way, I never said he was attractive. You did. So stop... putting words in my mouth. Even if he was attractive- and I’m not saying that he is- I mean, I guess he could be, but remember, *I’m not the one saying that-* even if he is attractive, I still haven’t been... seduced by him. So. Yeah.”

“...It seems the effects of the curse are worse than I thought,” Tanaka said gravely.

Hinata cursed under his breath, then said, loudly, “Thanks for the, uh, protection spell. Tell Sonia I say hi. See you soon. Goodbye.”

“Wait, Hinata, I haven’t finished explaining-”

“*Goodbye.*” Hinata hung up the phone and dropped it on his pile of clothes on the countertop.

He glanced up at the mirror, feeling utterly harassed. His brown hair had grown slightly longer over the summer, falling just a bit into his hazel eyes. His skin was warm and tan, cheeks slightly pink from the sun at the lake yesterday. He knew he wasn’t exactly bad-looking, or anything, but he supposed that, to Komaeda, he just looked plain. Really, his most notable feature was that he was still blushing, *hard*, even under the fluorescent lights of the bathroom.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he said to his reflection. (For obvious reasons, it didn’t respond.)

Hinata groaned, looking down at the sink. His face still felt hot, so he turned on the faucet and splashed himself with cold water a couple times, trying to calm himself down. When he glanced back up at the mirror, he set his expression in a steely frown.

“This is going to go away,” he muttered, glaring at his reflection. “It has to. It’s just a stupid crush on some guy you got stuck with. It’s probably... Stockholm Syndrome.” *Yeah, that must have been right.* “Maybe I can get Tsumiki to diagnose me with that. Being stuck with Komaeda for a week has finally pushed me over the edge. That’s all.”

Does Komaeda think my bedhead looks messy? his stupid, useless brain supplied.

Shut up, brain, he thought back. And out of pure, unadulterated spite, he ran a hand through his hair, purposefully messing it up even more.

When he returned to the room, he had to keep himself from smiling at just *seeing* Komaeda. Komaeda was already dressed - black jeans with a tear at one knee and an old, worn shirt - and he was looking at himself in the mirror, tugging at his hair, pouting slightly. It was ridiculously endearing.

These were the things he would live with, Hinata decided: cut-off glances, hidden smiles, unspoken thoughts. He would allow himself these small things so he wouldn’t have to think about anything bigger.

“Morning,” he said once he’d finally wiped the smile off his face.

“Ah, Hinata!” Komaeda turned around quickly, his eyes going a bit wide. “I finished the book you gave me.”

Hinata tried to look away. “Did you like it?”

Komaeda nodded eagerly. “I’m going to read it again as soon as we get back to Tokyo.”

This time, Hinata couldn't stop himself from grinning like an idiot. "You are telling me *all* your thoughts about it in the car ride."

When Hinata typed *Tokyo* into the car's navigation system, he almost felt disappointed. It was ridiculous, like he was nostalgic for something that hadn't even ended yet.

"Welcome to Monokuma Navigation Services! It's time to greet another beee-yutiful day!" the car blared immediately.

Komaeda sadly glanced from the console to the backseat, where the giant Monokuma plush was still sitting. "I can't escape him," he muttered, utterly despondent, and Hinata immediately burst into laughter.

The navigation system told them to go down Joban Expressway for a while. It was a nice day out, cloudless and warm, so Hinata rolled down the windows when they got close to the ocean. The breeze smelled like flowers, salt, and a little bit like the fake new-car smell that always hung around Kuzuryu's car.

After a while, Hinata pulled over at a roadside station near Izura Beach, a small place overlooking the ocean cliffs surrounded by a grassy field. The time until they got home kept ticking down further and further, like a countdown clock over his head. It made him feel stupid, but he wasn't ready to go home yet.

"Ah, we're stopping?" Komaeda asked from the passenger seat.

Hinata shrugged. "I'm kinda tired of driving," he said, feeling just a little bit guilty. "And it's a nice day out."

"...I didn't mean to make you drive me all this way," Komaeda said, a small note of concern sneaking into his voice. "Sorry. You shouldn't have to do all that."

Hinata quickly shook his head. "It's fine! I actually like driving, I just-" he stopped, struggling to find an explanation that wouldn't make him seem like he was either 1) completely desperate, or 2) mad at Komaeda. "I just wanted to get some snacks," was what he ended up going with.

"Oh," Komaeda said, seeming placated. "I can help drive, if you want!"

Hinata narrowed his eyes. "You don't have a license."

Komaeda raised his eyebrows. "You sound like Kuzuryu," he said, and Hinata laughed.

They walked around the field for a bit, stretching their legs, before heading into the station. After wandering around the market, they picked up a bag of fresh peaches, a couple of snacks, and two packaged ice cream bars; Hinata got chocolate, and Komaeda, of course, got mystery flavor.

The two leaned back against the hood of the car while they ate their ice cream, looking out at the cliffside ocean before them. The waves were a dazzling blue-green as they crashed

against the rocks, glittering like diamonds under the bright light of the sun.

Hinata took another lick of his ice cream, watching Komaeda from the corner of his eye. 'Mystery flavor' had luckily turned out to be green tea, one of Komaeda's favorites. Komaeda gave another enthusiastic lick to his ice cream, his pink tongue darting out to stop it from dripping, and Hinata forced his gaze away, face burning.

He caved in and let Komaeda drive for the next couple miles on an abandoned back road near the ocean. It was a low-traveled stretch of pavement, half-shaded by trees popping up from the sand.

"Take a left at the next stop sign," Hinata said, glancing up at the road.

Komaeda drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. "Ah, which one is the brake pedal again?"

"Komaeda, I swear to *god*-" Hinata started. Komaeda just laughed, and Hinata flipped him off from the passenger seat. "You are so not funny."

They switched back into their normal seats just before it started to rain. The car was still on a small road, further into the forest, and Hinata looked up to see storm clouds beginning to gather around the trees. He flicked on the windshield wipers, watching as raindrops started to smack against the glass.

After a few minutes, the cloudy drizzle had upgraded to a full-on rainstorm. Gray mist surrounded the edges of the road, creeping in, and even with the windshield wipers on the highest setting, Hinata could barely keep the windows clear.

"Make sure you drive slow," Komaeda said, peering out the passenger window. "We don't want to hydroplane."

"I'm already going five below the speed limit," Hinata replied, stubborn. "Besides, hydroplaning is, like, a myth, or something. It never actually happens to anyone."

"I don't think that's true."

"Pretty sure it is."

"Conditions right now are prime for hydroplaning, Hinata." Komaeda leaned back against his seat, arms crossed. "You should really be more careful."

"We aren't going to hydroplane," said Hinata confidently. And then, a second later: "Oh, *shit*, we're hydroplaning!"

The car had begun veering uncontrollably over the wet pavement, almost like it was floating. Hinata quickly took his foot off the accelerator and tried to steer into the skid, everything flashing before his eyes. The car slowed down, and Hinata turned onto a small gravel turnoff as they skidded to a stop.

He closed his eyes, gripped the steering wheel hard, and took several deep breaths. By the time he opened his eyes again, the world had gone back to normal.

Hinata unbuckled his seatbelt and jumped outside, checking the tires and the engine. Tree cover above prevented him from getting too soaked as he examined the car. He looked at it closely, desperately, before concluding that everything was fine. Letting out a sigh of relief, Hinata walked over to the passenger door and opened it, glancing down at Komaeda.

"The car is okay, so we're good to go," he said, relieved. "I'm really sorry about this. Seriously, sorry. I should have believed you about the hydroplaning thing."

But Komaeda didn't respond, and when Hinata looked over, he realized Komaeda hadn't moved since they'd spun off the road. He was frozen in place, hands gripping his jeans, and the look on his face could best be described as *terrified*.

"Komaeda?" Hinata paused, concerned. "...Are you okay?"

That seemed to snap Komaeda out of his trance, and his gaze jerked towards Hinata, eyes going wide as they settled on him. Hinata was sure he was about to get yelled at, which was probably deserved, and he braced himself. Instead, though, Komaeda jumped out of his seat and grabbed Hinata's hand, turning it over in his - *checking for a pulse*, Hinata realized belatedly. He looked back up at Komaeda, meeting his frantic eyes.

"Are- are *you* okay?" Komaeda asked, the words spilling breathlessly from his lips. "You matter way more than- I mean, you didn't hit your head or anything, right? You're okay?"

"All good," Hinata confirmed, more than a little bit confused. "You don't have to worry so much."

"Of course I have to worry!" Komaeda's voice raised just a bit. "This was *my fault!*"

"...Your fault?" Hinata echoed. "What are you talking about? *I'm* the idiot who almost crashed the car."

Komaeda made a small, distressed sound, as if there was something Hinata wasn't quite getting. "But I put you in danger by just being there! Don't you get it? This is the consequences of my luck finally catching up with me!"

"But you..." Hinata gestured around, confused. "You *didn't do anything.*"

"You're going to get hurt." Komaeda said suddenly. He dropped Hinata's hand as if it had burned him, stumbling backwards with his hands held out in front of him like some sort of barrier.

Hinata looked at him, bewilderment and sympathy forming some strange knot in his stomach. "...Komaeda?"

"Stay away from me." His voice wavered with uncertainty. "Please, don't come any closer."

“...I won’t get hurt, okay?” Hinata took a slow, cautious step forwards. “It’ll all be fine, so just-”

“Stay away from me, you-” Komaeda stepped back, eyes wild like a cornered animal. “You Reserve Course *trash*.”

“Huh?” Hinata froze, almost tripping over his sneakers mid-step. “I don’t- After we talked, a few days ago, I thought you didn’t feel-”

“I was lying! Of course I still think you’re worthless. So you should just leave me behind!” Komaeda exclaimed, his voice verging on desperation. “Drive away without me and don’t come back!”

Hinata looked at him, and all he saw was fear. “...We’re not doing this again.” He scowled. “We’ve made so much progress, and I’m not going to let you tear it down just because you’re blaming yourself for something ridiculous.”

Komaeda dug his heels into the ground, frustrated. “It’s not ridiculous, Hinata! People get hurt when they’re close to me. That’s just a fact. You should know that by now! For every stroke of good luck I receive, something equally unlucky has to happen in return. That’s how it *works*.”

“You- you don’t have to hold yourself accountable for all that stuff.” Hinata said it carefully, like he was trying to defuse an active landmine. “That wasn’t your fault, and neither is this.”

Komaeda shook his head frantically. “I was deluding myself, thinking that this would be okay. I was foolishly hoping that maybe this time I could-” He bit his lip, then looked down. “I never should have let myself get so close to you. I should have known what would happen. What *always* happens. I’ve been trying to get better, I really have, but I forgot that my very existence is a danger to everyone around me!”

“...Komaeda,” Hinata said quietly.

“Whenever I let myself experience good things, it hurts other people. It *kills* them,” Komaeda said, his voice shaking. “This has been happening my whole life, Hinata. You don’t have to try so hard to comfort me - in fact, doing so is only putting you in more danger!”

“I’m not in danger,” Hinata said, taking a step closer.

“You *are*! If you would just listen to me-”

Without warning, Hinata wrapped his arms around Komaeda, cutting him off. He had a point to prove, and this was beginning to seem like the only way to do it. Komaeda froze completely, seeming unsure of exactly what was happening.

“Hah...Hinata...?” he mumbled.

“It’s a hug, Komaeda. I’m hugging you.”

Komaeda lightly placed his hands on Hinata's waist, holding onto him as carefully as possible, like if he wasn't cautious Hinata would shatter under his touch.

"Now I'm close to you," Hinata said. "And I'm not getting hurt, am I?"

Komaeda's cheeks flushed, and he frowned slightly before answering. "...I suppose you aren't," he admitted.

"You don't have to blame yourself for everything, Komaeda. Sometimes bad things are gonna happen, but it's not always because of *you*. That's just the way the world is."

"Please, Hinata, you- you really have to be more careful around me."

Hinata didn't look away. "Even if I stay away from you now, I could still get hit by a bus tomorrow. Or struck by lightning, or mauled by Tanaka's pet bear, or- whatever. I could die at any time whether or not I'm with you."

"...I guess," Komaeda conceded, shoulders slumping just a bit. "But even so, my presence presents a..." He paused. "An elevated risk."

"Sure, maybe a small one," Hinata admitted.

Komaeda sighed. "But a risk all the same."

"...Well, then, it's worth the risk," Hinata said quietly. "Being close to you is worth the risk."

"*Hinata*," Komaeda whispered, burying his face in Hinata's shoulder. His grip on Hinata's waist tightened, pulling him ever so slightly closer.

Hinata understood what Komaeda wanted, but refused to ask for; he pulled him in further, wrapping him comfortingly in his arms. Komaeda held Hinata even closer, pressing them together.

"No matter what I do," Komaeda mumbled against his neck, "you always stay. I don't get it. At first, I just wanted to be thankful that someone would be interested in trash like me, but now... I can't stop myself from wondering."

"What's to wonder about?"

"It's incomprehensible! All I do is cause problems for you, but you keep spending time with me, and listening to me talk, and- and acting like you actually *care* about me." His voice wavered on the word 'care,' as if the very concept was ridiculous to even think about. "I don't understand it, Hinata."

"Of course I care about you, Komaeda." Hinata looked down. "I wouldn't be... doing all of this if I didn't."

"...You shouldn't say things like that." Despite himself, Komaeda clung onto Hinata even tighter. "It's even more confusing when you do things like *this*. You let me believe that it could be real, even though I know I don't deserve it."

“It *is* real,” Hinata asserted. “And it’s not about deserving anything - I don’t care about whatever karmic justice you think you’ve earned from the world. I’m just a regular person. All I care about is that I really do like spending time with you.”

A small, broken noise escaped Komaeda’s throat. He moved a hand to cover his mouth, but when he touched his face, his hand came back wet.

Hinata seemed to realize it at the same time Komaeda did. “Oh, shit. You’re crying.” His grip on Komaeda’s waist loosened slightly. “Uh... did I go too far?”

Komaeda shook his head, then tightened his grip. “Y- You... really are incredible, Hinata.” His eyes were shiny, his lips were tight, and it was entirely obvious that he was *really* trying not to cry.

Hinata moved his hands down to Komaeda’s thin waist, their foreheads pressed together, Komaeda’s arms looped around his neck. His chest felt tight and his hands were shaking. He prayed Komaeda didn’t notice. He tightened his hands a bit and felt Komaeda shiver beneath him and arch into his touch, like he hadn’t ever been touched like that before, like he was aching for it.

“Hinata,” Komaeda said softly, taking a small step backwards to look at him. “Hinata, I-”

But before Komaeda could finish, he stumbled back off the edge of the hill on the side of the road. Hinata grabbed for his hand, but he was too late; Komaeda had already begun rolling down the grassy slope. Hinata jumped down after him, carefully placing his feet so he wouldn’t trip too.

He eventually made it to the bottom of the hill to see Komaeda sitting on the forest floor, looking slightly dazed. Hinata leaned over him, concerned. “Holy shit, are you okay?”

“Perfectly fine, Hinata!” Komaeda attempted to stand up, but Hinata could tell he was still pretty shaky. When he tried to take a step forwards, he tripped, and he would have fallen to the ground if Hinata hadn’t caught him. Hinata hauled him to his feet and gripped his shoulders to keep him upright.

“Perfectly fine, my ass,” Hinata said with a roll of his eyes.

“It’s not broken. I’ll be fine,” Komaeda said, still not standing up straight.

Hinata glanced over him, worried. “C’mon. I can carry you, or something.”

“Oh, Hinata, a *worthless* piece of human trash like me doesn’t deserve to-” Komaeda shut up immediately as Hinata scooped him into his arms. “...Ah...Hinata..?!”

Hinata had known Komaeda was skinny, but even he was surprised by how easy the other boy was to throw around. He was also surprised at how appealing that realization was to him. When he looked down, he found Komaeda’s face had gone completely pink, and he was staring up at Hinata breathlessly.

“I- I don’t want to wait for you to try to walk back up on your own,” explained Hinata as he started up the hill. His chest felt tight, and his whole body felt warm. “You’d take too long.”

Komaeda still looked extraordinarily embarrassed, but a curious gleam had appeared in his eyes. “...You’re, um. P-pretty strong, huh...?”

“I guess. Nidai makes me train with him whenever we hang out.”

“Y-yes, but I didn’t expect you to be so-” Komaeda froze in his arms. “Um! Not that I’ve ever considered how strong you would be. That’s, ah, definitely not something I stay up at night thinking about.”

Hinata’s face was burning. “...Did you hit your head or something?”

“No, really, I’m fine, so you *really* don’t have to, ah, carry me-”

“Well, I’m not gonna leave you behind.”

“A-Amazing... A heart that refuses to give up until the very end... That really must be hope...!”

Hinata devoutly looked up as he got back to the road, refusing to let Komaeda see how embarrassed he’d become. When they got back to the car, Hinata let him down next to the door.

Komaeda stumbled a bit when he stepped down, but he quickly righted himself. “See? It’s fine,” he said, climbing into the passenger seat. “You- you didn’t have to do that.”

Hinata went around to the driver’s seat, closing the door behind him. “...I wanted to,” he said quietly, and Komaeda went silent immediately.

They stayed there for a moment, listening to the drum of rain against the car roof.

When Hinata finally spoke, he could feel his heart in his throat. “There was something you wanted to tell me, right?”

“Hm?” Komaeda asked, sounding a bit too practiced to be completely genuine.

Hinata saw through it immediately. “Before you tripped, it kinda seemed like you were going to say something.”

Komaeda glanced up at the car roof, clearly avoiding eye contact. “It’s... not important anymore.”

Hinata swallowed, then pressed forwards. “Why not?”

“I was going to ask you a question, of sorts,” Komaeda said, an odd smile on his face. “But I’ve realized I already know the answer, and it was a stupid question to begin with.”

“...If that was all,” Hinata mumbled, a strange sense of disappointment coming over him.

He cursed himself for feeling that way. Had he been expecting a confession, or something? Was that really something he'd even *want* from Komaeda?

With a sigh, he relented. No matter how much he'd tried to convince himself otherwise, he already knew that it was.

Of course, that didn't make it any more realistic. He couldn't bring his chances up from zero.

They booked a room on the second story of a tiny hotel near the sea. They were barely closer to Tokyo than they'd started, but they both agreed driving any more that day was probably a bad idea. Their hotel room were two beds, *not that Hinata was counting*. They dropped off their bags and, after discovering the rain had let up, walked a couple blocks into town to get dinner.

The restaurant was small and homey, and when Hinata found himself crammed into a tiny corner booth across from Komaeda, he didn't really mind at all. They both ordered udon, hot and delicious in the still-cold dusk.

When they left the restaurant, it had, of course, started raining again. The two boys stood underneath the small front awning, watching the storm.

"How unlucky," Komaeda muttered, and Hinata had to stop himself from laughing.

He was struck by the thought that this was almost like the first time he and Komaeda had met; stuck together outside during a surprise rainstorm, no umbrellas or ways back home. As he watched the rain fall over the town, he imagined that they were the same buildings from Hope's Peak.

And Komaeda must have been thinking of it too, because out of nowhere, he mumbled, "I didn't forget my umbrella."

Hinata turned towards him, confused. "You - huh?"

Komaeda laughed nervously. "On the day we met, I mean. I didn't forget my umbrella. I carry around a multi-tool in my backpack, Hinata, of *course* I wouldn't forget something as simple as an umbrella in winter. With my worthless luck, I know to always expect the worst, so I have to be prepared." He looked down, staring at the rain puddles on the pavement. "It was closing time. I was about to leave the building, but then I saw you standing outside, in the rain. I didn't know who you were, or why you were there, but you just looked... alone. So, I, um. I ran back and caught up with the little old librarian just as she was leaving through the side exit, and I convinced her to take my umbrella. She thought I was just being nice, but that wasn't why I did it."

"...Then why did you?" Hinata asked carefully.

"I saw you, and I wanted to meet you," Komaeda admitted. "It's selfish, but... I wanted to talk to you, if only for a moment."

Hinata leaned back on his heels. “Until you found out I was from the Reserve Course.”

“I believe we’ve established that I was mistaken about that, yes,” Komaeda said tightly.

Hinata felt something warm begin to burn in his chest. “...You really did all that just to talk to me?”

Komaeda sighed. “Ah. It’s humiliating, but that’s to be expected of someone like me.”

Hinata looked down to hide his smile. “It’s kind of flattering, actually.”

“Is it?” Komaeda asked, almost nervous.

“Well, yeah.” Hinata shrugged. “I’ve never really been treated like I was... special.”

“But you are,” Komaeda said.

Hinata turned to him, searching for any sort of sarcasm, but there was nothing. Komaeda seemed so painfully sincere it almost hurt to look at him. Hinata’s throat felt dry.

“Do you wanna run back to the hotel?” he asked, looking for something to keep himself distracted.

Komaeda tilted his head. “That would be... fun, but knowing my luck, I would probably slip.”

Hinata grabbed his hand. “Now you won’t. I’ll catch you.”

Komaeda’s whole face went pink. “Ah, you don’t h-have to do that just, um, for my sake-”

“*Okay*,” Hinata said pointedly, “three, two, one, run for it!”

He pulled Komaeda out from the overhang, immediately feeling the splash of raindrops against his body. Komaeda let out a surprised laugh, but he let himself be tugged along by one hand, the other held uselessly above his head to block the rain.

A few minutes later they rushed back into the hotel, ignoring the strange looks they got from the other guests. Hinata dragged them to their room, and he didn’t let go of Komaeda’s hand until they were inside.

Hinata grabbed a new set of clothes and went to the bathroom, leaving the bedroom for Komaeda. After throwing on sweatpants and hanging his wet clothes on the curtain rod, he dried off his hair with one of the fluffy hotel towels. He looked at himself in the mirror again, just like he had this morning, and he came to a conclusion.

He was going to accept his feelings for Komaeda. He wasn’t going to *do* anything about them, but he was going to accept them. He couldn’t do anything else.

It was almost comforting. At least now Hinata knew exactly where he stood.

He stepped out into the main room, eyes immediately falling on Komaeda, who was now wearing a sweatshirt and sitting on one of the beds. He looked a little bit lost, and his hair was still dripping water into his face.

Hinata doubled back to the bathroom to grab a new towel, then went over and sat next to Komaeda on the bed. "You didn't even dry your hair properly," he chastised.

Komaeda immediately ran a hand through his curls, almost embarrassed. "Ah, sorry if it's unsightly-"

Hinata's brow furrowed. "No, I meant you're gonna catch a cold. Here, just let me-" He turned to face Komaeda, using the towel to dry him off. "Do you *want* to get sick-" He started. Komaeda glanced up at him, his pale skin flushed pink, unruly hair hanging his face, green eyes wide. Hinata's hands stilled. "Oh."

Komaeda blinked at him. "...Hinata?"

Hinata swallowed. "Just... be more careful next time." He leaned back and let out a deep breath. There was something he'd been wondering about, and now felt as good a time as any to say it. "Komaeda, can I ask you something?"

Komaeda tilted his head. "I'm not sure I'll be able to provide an adequate answer, but go ahead."

Hinata tightened his grip on the towel in his lap, then tossed it to the side. "Yesterday, at the lake. You... you told me that after your diagnosis, you realized all you'd ever wanted was someone's love."

Komaeda's gaze flicked down. "That... isn't really a question, Hinata."

"Right. Okay." Hinata took a deep breath. "Now that you're not dying anymore, do you think- are you- is that still true?"

Komaeda bit his lip, clearly embarrassed. "My circumstances are different, but... yes, the realization still stands," he admitted. "I'm well aware that it's a ridiculous wish for me to have. I accepted a long time ago that I'm an awful, loathsome person, so I would never delude myself into believing anyone could love me. I've already resigned myself to a life of loneliness." He hesitated, looking down and tugging on the sleeve of his sweater. "...But that doesn't stop me from *wanting*."

"You're not," Hinata said quickly. "Unlovable, I mean. It's not like it's completely out of the realm of possibility for someone to feel that way about you. I'm sure there's at least *one person*."

Komaeda ducked his head and began to fiddle with the edge of the comforter. "You don't have to tell ridiculous lies just to preserve my feelings, Hinata. I'm aware of the awful extent of my desire. It's presumptuous, to assume it could ever happen. It's improper. I know that. I know it's just not realistic."

Hinata glanced away, sympathy filling his chest. “You’re betting kinda low, aren’t you? It’s like you can’t even let yourself imagine getting what you hope for.”

Komaeda shook his head. “Hope implies it’s something I could have. This is... a daydream, instead of true hope. It’s something I want so badly I never stop thinking about it, but I’ll always know it’s an impossibility. It just makes me happy to wonder about.”

Hinata looked at him curiously. “...What do you think about?”

“...You don’t want to hear about *that*,” Komaeda said. His voice wavering just a bit, and his face was a deep shade of pink.

Hinata shrugged, trying to hide his eagerness. “I wouldn’t mind it. I mean, we’re already on the subject.”

Komaeda sighed, conceding. “...To be loved, I guess. That’s all. To be loved by someone, and to offer my worthless love in return.” With a start, he turned to look at Hinata. “What about *you*, then?”

“What *about* me?”

“You know what I mean! I had to talk about it. You do too.” Komaeda’s eyes darted away, almost nervous. “What would you... want?”

Hinata thought for a moment about the tragedy that was his romantic history. He’d gone out with a couple girls in middle school, but it never lasted for more than a week or two, and the first time he’d ever actually kissed someone was when he’d been shoved in a closet with some random boy at his middle school graduation party. High school was almost worse; he’d had exactly one very awkward date with Nanami halfway through their first year, immediately after which they’d both agreed they were better off as friends. And there was, of course, the infamous game of Spin the Bottle at Ibuki’s second-year Christmas party that everyone involved had collectively agreed to never mention again.

“I dunno.” Hinata shrugged sharply. “What I’ve always wanted is someone who understands me, I guess. Someone who sees the worst parts of me - and *really* sees them, doesn’t just pretend they aren’t there - but at the end of the day, they can still sit down and think: ‘Yeah, I love him.’”

“Someone who loves you,” Komaeda said, nodding. “For everything.”

“For everything.” Hinata looked down. “It’s stupid, really. Just like you said, that isn’t very realistic.” He hesitated, the words almost spilling out of his mouth. “But sometimes they’ll say something that makes it seem like they can relate to me, or understand me - or they want to try, at least. When I’m around them, it’s like- it’s like I don’t have to pretend to be better than I actually am. They make me feel like a real person.”

When he finally met Komaeda’s eyes, they’d gone wide. “...You’re in love with someone *now*?” Komaeda asked.

Hinata cursed how stupidly observant Komaeda was. In retrospect, he really should have known better than to give so much away like that. And then there was the word Komaeda had used - *love*. Hinata wasn't sure if he loved him, but he thought that he might be able to, one day. He considered for a moment that there might not be much of a difference between those two things. "You figured it out, huh?" he asked weakly, pushing his hands through his hair.

"You were kind of talking in specifics," Komaeda admitted. "And I... I might have caught the last of your phone conversation last night."

Hinata sat up, alert. "You *what*?"

Komaeda held his hands up in surrender. "I didn't hear who you were talking about! And I didn't even put the pieces together until now." He looked down. "You don't have to tell me who it is," he said, but he clearly wanted to know.

A wry, empty smile started at the corners of Hinata's lips. "I... don't really think you'd approve."

Komaeda tilted his head in consideration, then grimaced. "...Is it Hanamura?"

Hinata snorted. "Oh my god, definitely *not* Hanamura."

Komaeda let out a small sigh of relief. "Good. You- I mean, you could have anyone, really, so you shouldn't set your sights so low."

"You're... definitely exaggerating."

"I'm not!" Komaeda protested. "Everyone in my class adores you. Even *Matsuda* from 77-A likes you, and he doesn't like anyone. And Hinata is so honest, and so handsome, and-" He cut himself off, eyes widening. "Um, anyways! That's not the point!"

Hinata's whole face had gone red. "...You don't have to flatter me just so I'll tell you who it is," he said eventually. "If I told you, you'd probably laugh."

"I *wouldn't*," Komaeda insisted, genuine. "I just... no matter who it is, I think- I think they truly must be the luckiest person in the world."

And maybe Hinata had picked up a few tricks from Komaeda, because his first response was to flop back on the bed and let out a wheeze of desperate, hysterical laughter. "Oh, yeah," he said weakly. "That about sums it up."

Hinata was hesitant to return to his own bed, but it had to happen eventually. At least Komaeda hadn't yet caught onto the fact that Hinata had been talking about *him*. Accepting his feelings was one thing, but actually admitting them to Komaeda was entirely something else.

As he flicked off the light switch and crawled into his bed, Hinata stared up at the ceiling. He supposed he could let himself do this one thing.

He glanced across the room, just for a second, feeling stupid and empty and longing.
“Goodnight.”

There was a rustle from Komaeda’s bed, and then a small, whispered, “Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

WE HAVE FANART?? TYSM

(<https://twitter.com/LimeKnife/status/1398011997606735873>)

and this BEAUTIFUL one I LOVE YOU (https://www.instagram.com/p/COd5Pdbl5ft/?utm_medium=copy_link)

day 8

Chapter Summary

A realization, a decision, and the last stop on the long road home.

Chapter Notes

I want to thank all of you for your fanart, encouraging comments, and kudos!! there's been such a sudden increase in popularity for this fic and it makes my heart so happy (´∀`)♡
and, um. I upped the rating for this chapter.
throws it at you and runs

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Hinata woke up, he instantly knew something was wrong.

He was usually a deep sleeper, whenever he finally got to sleep, so he wasn't quite used to the sudden jolt of being awake. Hinata groggily pushed himself up on his hands and wiped the sleep out of his eyes before glancing around the room. It was still dark out, the only source of light coming from the pale blue glow of the alarm clock on the small table between the beds.

As soon as his eyes drifted towards the other bed, he knew why he'd woken up - Komaeda was mumbling something under his breath, almost frantic. Hinata frowned, annoyed at having been disturbed, but then he realized Komaeda was still asleep. He was fidgeting, clearly uncomfortable, and he had his pillow in a death grip.

He was having a nightmare, Hinata realized. He'd heard you weren't supposed to wake someone up during a bad dream, but what else was he supposed to do? Just sit there and pretend to sleep while Komaeda was clearly in pain?

Fuck that, he thought, stepping down onto the floor. He swallowed, his heart close to beating out of his chest, before leaning in and lightly shaking the other boy's shoulder. "...Hey, Komaeda?"

Komaeda's eyes shot open immediately. He quickly pushed himself up onto his hands, shuddering as he struggled to catch his breath. "Hinata? I don't- why-" Suddenly, he buried his face in his hands. "...A nightmare. Of course."

Hinata resisted the urge to reach out to him. "Are you okay?" he asked instead.

"Oh!" Komaeda's posture went rigid, and he was looking at Hinata with wide, almost scared eyes. "Um. I, um." He was still breathing fast. "I didn't mean to wake you up. I'm sorry. I know you must already be tired of sharing a room with me, and of course I'm just making it more difficult by disturbing your sleep- which is even worse, because you've got to be sick of driving me around everywhere-"

"It's... fine," Hinata said, stifling a yawn behind his hand. "Not your fault. D'you get nightmares a lot?"

Komaeda twisted his fingers in the sheets. "Sometimes." A sharp shrug. "This is the first one I've gotten on the trip, though. I think I sleep better when I-" He cut himself off quickly, looking away.

Hinata blinked, eyes heavy. "When you what?"

Komaeda shook his head. "Never mind."

"C'mon," Hinata murmured, leaning in. "I wanna help."

After a moment, Komaeda ducked his head and gave a small, defeated sigh. "...I sleep better when I'm... next to... someone."

Hinata felt his heart swoop in his chest. "You want me to...?" His eyes darted between himself and the bed, a silent, unspoken offer.

"No!" Komaeda whispered, loud and hushed all at once. Hinata flinched a bit at the tone, and Komaeda's expression only grew more worried. "I mean- I'm not going to make you do *that*- with someone like me- and you probably wouldn't even be able to sleep, you'd be so disgusted-"

"We've slept in the same bed before," Hinata said slowly.

"Not on *purpose*," Komaeda muttered. "I won't let you force yourself to sleep next to a lowly worm like me when you have another option."

Hinata realized he was almost right - this was the first time he'd consciously offered to stay in the same bed as Komaeda. There was no semblance of being forced to share. This was only because he wanted to. But also: "...Worm?" Hinata repeated, amusement creeping into his sleep-deprived voice.

Even Komaeda seemed to realize what he'd said. "That was... a poor choice of words," he said, a small laugh escaping him. "I, um. Sorry."

Hinata swallowed. "I want to help you," he repeated, propping one knee against the bed. "Let me- let me help you."

Komaeda held still for a moment, like he was expecting Hinata to take it back. When he didn't, Komaeda looked up at him, and something in his expression had shifted. With wide

green eyes and a breathless voice, he nodded. "...Okay."

Hinata pulled himself onto the bed, relaxing against the pillows. He pulled the sheet over himself before turning to look at Komaeda. "See? Comfortable," he said quietly.

Komaeda turned towards him, just a little bit. "Thank you," he whispered, voice close to breaking.

"G'night," Hinata said, because it was all he could say.

Komaeda's gaze flicked towards the alarm clock, the corners of his mouth twitching up. "Good morning, actually."

Hinata would have rolled his eyes if he wasn't so exhausted. "Oh, aren't you smart."

"It's accurate."

"It's-" Hinata snorted, nudging Komaeda in the shin with his foot. "Just go to sleep."

Komaeda gave him a small, crooked smile. "If you insist." His tone was amused, but under the covers, Hinata could tell he was still shaking.

Hinata wanted to do *something* to help, but he didn't at all know what. From this close, he could feel the thump of Komaeda's heartbeat, jackrabbit-fast, against the twin size mattress. He wasn't over the dream, Hinata knew that much.

He couldn't say much to comfort him, and Komaeda didn't seem to want to talk about it, so those weren't options. He could try some sort of physical contact, something warm, but he didn't know if that would work, either.

Then he thought back to yesterday, the hug outside of the car in the rain. Touching Komaeda had certainly seemed to help then.

Hinata willed himself to move, trying to force his hand to close the gap between them. It was, at most, it was a couple inches. They were sharing a bed meant for one. But he was, as always, too scared to actually act on his feelings. Even the thought of touching Komaeda right now made him ridiculously, incredibly nervous. What if he got rejected? What if Komaeda caught onto his feelings?

On the other hand, Hinata thought, he could just get over himself and try to help his friend. Steeling his nerves and taking a deep breath, he bridged the gap and took Komaeda's hand.

Komaeda froze, his eyes snapping open and flicking down towards the covers. He looked between his hand and Hinata a couple times, like he wasn't sure if *this* was a dream, too. In the thin blue light of the alarm clock, he barely looked real.

After what felt like a lifetime, Komaeda's fingers laced themselves between his, hand trembling, breaking whatever illusion had come over Hinata. *He was real*, Hinata reminded himself. This was actually happening.

Hinata squeezed his hand once, and when he fell asleep, their hands were still interlocked.

This time, Hinata knew their situation was entirely his fault.

Every other time he'd woken up - and he was going to kill anyone who ever heard him use this word - *cuddling* with Komaeda, there had been some layer of plausible deniability. Some sort of deflection, or excuse, or whatever dumb bullshit he wanted to use to justify it to himself. But this time, he knew it was because of him. He was the one who had crawled into Komaeda's bed in the early hours of the morning. Who had held him tight to stop him from shaking.

Realization is a bitch, Hinata thought, tossing his head back against the pillows. He stared at the blank, white ceiling, letting it crash over him.

After a moment, Komaeda stirred slightly, half-opening his eyes before smiling, content, and closing them again. He nestled closer into Hinata's chest, his leg hooking around Hinata's ankle.

Hinata stared down at him, breathless. He blinked a few times to convince himself it wasn't some kind of desperate hallucination conjured up by his half-asleep brain. But when he looked back down, Komaeda was still there, dozing against his chest, arms tight around his waist. Hinata swallowed, unable to do anything besides stare.

And that's when Komaeda froze. In an instant, he pushed himself to the edge of the bed, eyes darting between himself and Hinata. His face was quickly turning very, very red. "Sorry, sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to take advantage, or anything, my body just does, um, *strange* things when I'm asleep, so I wasn't- I don't-

Right, Hinata reminded himself, ignoring the pit in his stomach. Komaeda was just shaken after last night, and most likely touch-starved after the kind of life he'd led. It was an unconscious action, seeking the closest warm body to cling onto. Of course he knew that.

"It's fine," Hinata said, trying for reassuring. Komaeda stared at him, aghast, and he continued. "Come on, do you remember how many times we've woken up like that? This is nothing."

"...You aren't disgusted?"

Hinata shrugged. "I've, like, *drooled* on you. There's pretty much nothing about you that could disgust me at this point."

A small, hidden smile was creeping across Komaeda's face. "You're... a very strange person, Hinata."

Hinata almost laughed. "I can't believe you're the one saying that to *me*."

It was becoming increasingly hard to focus on the road.

To be fair, Hinata had been driving for days now. The roads had all started to blend together, directions seemed meaningless, and, well- the boy in the passenger seat was *distracting*.

There was early-morning light coming in through the windshield, casting a soft glow over Komaeda. He was toying with the tear in his jeans, eyes darting back and forth like he wasn't sure where he was allowed to look. Hinata's heart ached just watching him.

"How much longer till Tokyo?" Hinata asked, feeling strangely like he was running out of time.

Komaeda glanced down at his phone, which displayed the Monokuma GPS they'd finally figured out how to mute. "Just over two hours," he said, then paused. "It's the last day of the trip, isn't it?"

Hinata tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "...I guess it is."

"I mean, it's only a three-hour drive home," Komaeda said. "Even with all of our car troubles and your admittedly lackluster driving ability, I doubt there's anything that could mess it up that badly."

Hinata's throat felt dry. "I'm excited to see everyone again," he finally said.

Komaeda nodded, slightly stiff. "I'm sure they miss you a lot."

"You don't think they miss you?"

"...I'm not naive."

Hinata sent him a sympathetic glance from across the car. "Well, they're probably *bored* without you around to cause trouble."

Komaeda actually laughed, covering his mouth with his hand. "That's... certainly more likely." He looked out the window for a moment, trailing his long fingers against the glass. "You know, the road we're on actually passes by a town I visited once as a child," he said, pensive. "Hitachi. My parents took me there, a long time ago."

"Is it a nice place?" Hinata asked.

Komaeda smiled, serene. "It's beautiful," he said, his voice going soft for a moment. "This is... probably too much to ask," he started nervously, "but do you think we could stop there? Only for a little while, I promise, and we would still get back to Tokyo today - ah, but if you think it's too troublesome, we don't have to-"

Hinata glanced over at the passenger seat. "We'll still get home tonight?"

Komaeda nodded quickly.

Hinata bit back a grin, a strange sense of relief settling over his body. "Let's go."

With just a little bit of trouble and only one missed exit, Komaeda directed them towards the town. Their first stop was for lunch, a small cafe off a side-street that Komaeda remembered going to years ago.

As Hinata took a sip of his coffee, he watched Komaeda from across the table. He seemed happy, but there was an undercurrent of nervousness - he kept looking up at Hinata, like he was afraid this was going to bore him.

The thing was, Komaeda hadn't been worried about making Hinata stop at every rinky-dink roadside attraction at the beginning of the trip. He supposed it was because Komaeda hadn't really cared what Hinata had thought of him back then, and his heart skipped a beat as he wondered what that meant Komaeda thought *now*.

Their next stop was Hitachi Seaside Park, a giant botanical garden right by the ocean that Komaeda had visited before. There were miles of flowers and plants, sprawling out under the bright light of the sun.

Hinata followed Komaeda down the pathway, eyes wide as he looked around. It was easy to get lost in it all - fields of dreamy blue blossoms, paths through seas of golden sunflowers, thick green kochia brush that had just started the seasonal shift to orange.

They walked around until their feet hurt, taking in the sights and breathing in the fresh air. Finally stopping at a bench overlooking the whole park, Hinata let their knees touch when he sat down.

"Y'know, I'm glad we stopped here," Hinata said, honest.

At his side, Komaeda let out a small, almost relieved breath. "It's just as nice as I remembered," he said, happy. "You really like it?"

Hinata nodded. "I really do."

Komaeda grinned, ducking his head like he thought it would hide his smile. "It does scare me to think that I'm having fun without experiencing any bad luck," he said. "I mean, I feel so lucky right now that it wouldn't surprise me if one or two people I know had died!" He looked back at Hinata, almost guilty. "...But I guess I should stop thinking about such dangerous things, huh?"

Hinata clapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "That's the spirit." He let his hand linger for a half-second longer than necessary before returning it to his side.

They were heading back towards the car when Hinata noticed the flyer.

He slowed to a halt, stopping to look at a small piece of paper stapled to a telephone pole. *It seemed like some sort of advertisement*, Hinata thought, looking closer, for a festival that night.

Maybe he was looking for a reason to stay and the universe had brought him here. Even more accurate was that it had something to do with Komaeda's luck. The most likely answer, thought, was that Hinata just had really, really bad timing.

"Summer festival, huh?" Hinata looked over his shoulder. "We should go."

"...But that means we can't leave tonight," said Komaeda, clearly confused.

Hinata took a deep breath. "I don't mind if you don't."

Komaeda's eyes seemed hopeful, but he looked down and scuffed his shoe against the pavement. "I'm not going to subject you to more time with me than absolutely necessary."

"I'm actually having fun, you know." Hinata narrowed his eyes. "Do you want to stay or not?"

"Whatever Hinata wants," Komaeda said distantly.

"I'm asking what *you* want." Hinata honestly wondered if anyone had ever told him that before.

Komaeda glanced up at him quickly, eyes wide. "...I'd like to stay," he said, his voice small.

"Then we'll stay."

They called ahead to book a hotel room for the night, whatever was closest to the festival grounds, before they drove over. Hinata felt excitement and anticipation building up in his stomach the whole way there. It was like he was waiting for something, but he didn't yet know what.

It was just after sunset, and the whole place was lit up - strings of lights over the pathways, a soft glow from inside the stalls, paper lanterns dangling from above. People were milling through the walkways and gathering around the booths, ogling the food and cheering for the games. Hinata watched the crowd: High school girls trying not to trip over their yukata, little kids dripping shave ice all over their faces, young couples winning prizes for each other.

When his eyes fell on one of the booths, he grinned and nudged Komaeda in the side. "Hey, check it out," he said, pointing across the walkway. "If you knock over the cup tower in one shot, you get free takoyaki."

Komaeda gasped exaggeratedly, pressing his hand to his heart. "Hinata, I feel so *used*."

"Yeah, yeah," Hinata snorted. "Do you want free food or not?"

Komaeda rolled his eyes and walked towards the booth. Hinata pumped his fist in the air and chased after him.

The man at the counter dropped a baseball into Komaeda's hand. He had a smug look on his face, like he was absolutely certain some high school student wasn't going to be able to beat

his definitely-rigged game.

He had no idea who he was dealing with, Hinata thought, watching as Komaeda prepared to throw the ball. Before he did, though, Komaeda looked over at him. Hinata gave him a double thumbs-up, and Komaeda grinned, turning back to the booth. He tossed the ball forwards, completely casual, and it shot straight through the cup tower, knocking all of them down seamlessly.

After the booth owner had reluctantly handed them their takoyaki, the two boys stepped out into the festival, walking down the pathway. Hinata tossed one into his mouth. *Delicious*. He nudged Komaeda in the side, laughing under his breath. “Man, it is so convenient to hang out with you.”

“If you say so.” Komaeda smiled down at his food, barely even bothering to hide it. Seeing how happy he looked at something that was barely even a compliment shot straight through to the core of Hinata’s heart.

Of course, their luck with the food meant they had no luck with the games at all. Hinata was probably glad for that, seeing as most of the prizes seemed to be limited-edition Monokuma-themed collector’s memorabilia.

That didn’t stop them from trying; they’d gone from prize shooting to ring toss and ended up at the goldfish stall, failing spectacularly at all of them. He and Komaeda were knelt over a small tub of water, paper nets in hand, staring down at the fish swirling around the edges. Under the lights they seemed like sea of glittering orange, larger black fish darting in between.

“You feel kinda bad for them, right?” Hinata asked, fish swimming before his eyes.

Komaeda shrugged, then carefully dipped his paper net in the water. “Maybe they think it’s fun.”

“Could be. Their brains aren’t very big,” Hinata said, starting to follow around a goldfish with his net.

“Maybe if I catch one, I should name it Hajime,” Komaeda said, amused.

Hinata pulled his broken net from the water, glaring at Komaeda. “*Hey.*”

Komaeda snickered, pulling out his own broken net, and he was still smiling by the time they left the booth.

They wandered around the festival for a little while longer, ducking through crowds and pointing out different booths. Hinata made them stop for shave ice, a nice, cool treat in the still-warm summer air. After a while, he noticed people starting to head towards a large open field near the bottom of the hill.

“Fireworks must be starting soon,” Hinata said, leaning in close to Komaeda to be heard over the noise of the festival. “We should go over now to get good seats.”

“It would be... dangerous to sit too close.” Komaeda looked down. “If you want to watch them, that’s alright, I can check in early at the hotel-”

“Huh? Half the fun is having you there with me.” It was probably too much to admit, but it knocked the fight right out of Komaeda.

“O-oh?”

“What if we sit far away?” Hinata offered. “There’s no danger in that, right?”

“...Yeah.” Komaeda stood up just a bit straighter. “Makes sense that you’d be used to the nosebleed seats anyways, Reserve Course.”

“*There* it is.” Hinata snorted. “I’ve missed these little insults, Komaeda. You’ve really been slacking lately.”

“Ah. My mistake,” Komaeda said, amusement tilting at the edge of his voice. “I’ll be sure to insult you more in the future.”

They climbed up a large hill near the back of the festival, settling down once Komaeda had deemed them to be a safe distance away from the fireworks. Hinata leaned back against his palms, feeling soft grass under his hands, and looked out into the distance. He could see the vague glowing lights of the festival, the crowd gathering on the field further down, the dark ocean in the distance. He took a breath of fresh air, excitement building up in his stomach.

When a sudden thought struck him, he let out a small laugh. “Do you remember Soda and Ibuki’s New Year’s Eve fireworks show last year?” he asked, turning towards Komaeda.

A wry smile started at the corner of the other boy’s mouth. “When Soda almost burned off his eyebrows? How could I forget,” he snickered. “I think he assumed his mechanic talent would translate into *pyrotechnician*.”

Hinata rolled his eyes, grinning. “More like *pyromaniac*. Maybe the two of you would get along better than I thought.”

“Who do you think got him the fireworks?”

“You’re serious?” Hinata asked. Komaeda gave a small, devious nod, and Hinata burst into laughter. He still remembered Soda lighting the fireworks before tripping over his own feet in his attempts to run away, Ibuki jumping around the sparks and yelling excitedly, the rest of their friends gathered around the edges as they stared up at the sky.

Komaeda had been there, of course, standing slightly further away from everyone else. Hinata couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed him before.

With no warning, the first firework shot up, showering the horizon in sparks of gold. Hinata and Komaeda both turned forwards instantly. Their view was slightly obscured by trees, they were the only ones on their hill, and the fireworks looked far-away and distant.

It was beautiful.

They both watched, enraptured, as the fireworks continued. A rainbow of color and light in the sky, echoes booming all around them. Hinata spared a half-second to glance over at Komaeda. His face was bathed in light, fireworks reflected in his eyes, and he was smiling, wide and almost carefree. Hinata struggled to take his next breath, forcing himself to turn back to the sky.

They stayed for the whole time, unable to look away. Komaeda even tried to take a few photos with his flip-phone, which Hinata found sweet, if a little bit funny.

Eventually, after one last burst of light, the show was over. The bright fireworks above had been replaced by the small glow of fireflies, the sound of booming explosions by the distant hum of cicadas.

It was a short walk to the hotel Hinata had booked earlier. They stayed next to each other all along the winding path down a dirt road. Every once in a while, Hinata would risk a glance at Komaeda. He looked very nice in the moonlight, and sometimes, against all odds, he would be looking back.

By the time he stepped into the hotel, all of Hinata's nerves were on edge. The whole walk back, some strange kind of energy had been forming between him and Komaeda. Something that made him nervous, and excited, and almost hopeful.

As they stepped away from the check-in counter, Hinata's throat felt dry. "I'm gonna get some water," he said, glancing quickly at Komaeda. "Wait for me here, alright?"

Komaeda gave him a small nod, and Hinata forced himself to step away, heading towards the water cooler. He swallowed down a whole cup before refilling it, reminding himself to calm down.

Feeling slightly less dazed, he started back towards his original place. "Alright, let's-" Hinata stopped, looking around. "...Komaeda?" he asked, but the other boy was already gone.

Guess he went back to the room early, Hinata thought, feeling slightly hurt he hadn't waited for him. He walked down the hallway, stopping in front of the room number the receptionist had given him and sliding in the key.

When he opened the door, the lights were already dim, casting dark shadows on the walls. Hinata set the water cups on the dresser and took a few steps forwards, squinting to see Komaeda in the low light.

"Hey, man, you left without me, what's-" Hinata cut himself off when he got a closer look at Komaeda. He was hunched over, sitting on the edge of one of the beds, drawing into himself like he was trying to take up as little space as possible. His face was hidden in his hands, but Hinata guessed that if he could see it, Komaeda would look absolutely miserable. "Um," he said haltingly, taking a few small steps forwards. "Komaeda, are you... okay?"

Komaeda looked up quickly, eyes wide and guarded. "I- yes. Of course," he said, a slight waver to his voice. "I didn't realize you were, um. Coming back so soon. I would have composed myself more quickly."

Hinata, after a moment of thought, sat down on the edge of the bed next to him. "...You don't *seem* okay," he said carefully. "Can I do anything to help?"

Komaeda let out a pitiful sound that sounded almost like a laugh. "I wouldn't *dare* trouble you with something as worthless as my feelings. I've already bothered you enough tonight, and it's pathetic enough that I'm even-" He glanced up, just for a second. "I mean. I couldn't tell you. You would- that would just- make it worse."

Hinata stepped back, suddenly hurt. "I would... make it worse?"

Komaeda jolted upright. "No, wait, I didn't mean-"

Hinata swallowed, cursing the way his eyes had started to sting. He forced down whatever emotion was trying to boil to the surface and muttered, "...It's fine. I get it."

"You *really* don't," Komaeda insisted. He ran his hands through his hair, nervous, then sighed and looked up. "It's just- I've never really had a friend before. I'm sure you figured that out based on my abysmal social skills alone. And-" He sucked in breath. "After all this time I've spent with you, I finally know what it's like," he said, nervous. "Not to be lonely."

Hinata let out a long, shaky breath. "Is that a bad thing?" he asked, cursing the way his voice almost broke.

Komaeda looked at him, utterly forlorn. "That's the worst part! Because I've been having so much fun, but when this trip is over, I'm going to be alone again. And it's going to be *worse*, because this time I'm actually going to be aware of just how lonely I really am."

Hinata hesitated, finally beginning to catch on. "...You think you're going to be alone again?" he asked, his voice soft.

"I'm not *stupid*," Komaeda muttered. "I mean, do you think we'd actually be friends if we hadn't gotten stuck on this trip?" he asked. His tone was flat, like he was already resigned to some terrible truth. "Isn't this all just out of convenience?"

Hinata blinked, taken aback. "I dunno," he said, quiet. "That's- I don't think we became friends because it was easy. Because it wasn't, at least not at first. I kinda just thought- I don't know. That we kind of, maybe, just... liked each other?"

For half a second, Komaeda looked absolutely stricken - but it was barely there before the flat expression was back as soon as it had left. "...Maybe not convenience." He tapped his fingers against his leg, still frustrated. "Proximity, then. Because we were stuck together."

"...Maybe." Hinata looked down, feeling completely lost. "...I like to think we might have become friends anyways."

Komaeda glanced around the room, hesitating before he spoke. "Do you really think we're going to stay friends when we get back home?"

Hinata shrugged helplessly. His chest felt like it was cracking open. "I hope so."

“What would that even look like?” Komaeda asked, despondent. “Sitting at the same lunch table? Making each other friendship bracelets?”

Now Komaeda was being an asshole on purpose, because Hinata knew for a fact that he *liked* friendship bracelets. “Does that really sound so bad?” he asked, hoping his voice wouldn’t break.

“It... wouldn’t be bad at all. It’s just, well- I was thinking about this the whole walk back. It’s different, out here. We can be... different.” Komaeda’s voice was getting emptier by the second. “But when we’re back there, it won’t be the same. I mean, you have all your other friends, who are so full of hope and talent and are- are the *shining stars of our universe*- and I have... no one.”

Hinata looked up at him. “...You can have me,” he promised, and it felt like more of an admission than anything else he’d ever said.

Komaeda’s eyes went wide for a moment, then he shook his head and looked back down. “We might talk occasionally, but it’ll be- a quick hello in the hallway, small talk by the vending machine. We both know you’d rather be spending time with any of your real friends than force yourself to take pity on me.” He hesitated. “I mean, I don’t want you to get- stuck. Pretending to still be my friend.”

Hinata choked back the sympathy rising up in his throat. He cared *so much* about Komaeda, and he had no way at all to show it. “...It wouldn’t be pretend,” he said, because it was all he could do. “Not for me, at least.”

“You’re so *stubborn!*” Komaeda hissed. When it escaped his lips, his eyes went a bit wide, as if he wished he hadn’t said anything at all. There was an undercurrent of desperation to his voice, though, and that was probably what made him keep talking. “You mess me up, you know that? How do you just say those things so easily? It’s like you don’t even know who you’re talking to! You mess me up,” he repeated, dazed. “How am I supposed to just continue on like things are normal when I- when you-” He cut himself off, burying his face in his hands and letting out a muffled noise of frustration.

Hinata froze, uneasy. “Did I... do something wrong?”

“Yes!” Komaeda said. “You *talked* to me. I could have gone through life intact if you’d had the common decency to leave me alone! To ignore me, just like everyone else! I’ve always been content with the thought that I’m useless, disgusting trash, but you... you make me feel not so worthless. Like maybe there’s hope for me, hope that I can create myself. And it terrifies me,” he admitted. “And- and perhaps you can create hope, too. I mean, you tolerated someone like me this entire trip, right?” Suddenly, he stood up and took a few steps backwards, a miserable expression crossing over his face. “And then, after all that, it’s just- ending. And I’m never going to get to feel like that again.”

“I’m not leaving, okay?” Hinata stood up, face-to-face with Komaeda. “If you’re... scared. That I’m going to leave you, when we get back. If that’s what this is about, then I want you to know - there’s nothing you could do that would drive me away, alright?”

Komaeda actually laughed. “You say that, but you have no idea what it actually means.” Suddenly, his eyes lit up, like he’d just found the finishing blow for his argument. “If you actually knew how I felt - how I *really* felt - you’d never want to speak to me again!”

Hinata took a step forwards. “What is it, then?”

“What?” Komaeda asked weakly, sounding like he’d been punched in the throat.

“Cards on the table, Komaeda,” Hinata said, trying to keep his voice even. “Just say it. I promise it’ll be fine.”

Komaeda’s expression was quickly shifting from miserable to panicked. “I *can’t tell you.*”

“What could be so horrible that you won’t just-” Hinata stopped in his tracks, something in his chest going cold. “Is it- is it that you still just think of me as a Reserve Course student? Is that it?”

“No!” Komaeda shook his head emphatically. “Not *that.*”

Hinata took another step closer. “Then *tell me!*”

For a moment, neither one of them spoke - just stared at each other, intensity crackling between them like Hinata was a metal fork and Komaeda was an electrical socket. Komaeda didn’t say anything, just stood there, staring. It was beginning to seem like he wasn’t going to say anything at all - Hinata thought that he must have pushed him too far, lost any chance of *anything*.

Not that he’d had much of a chance in the first place, anyways.

But of course they’d gotten stuck here again: Stalemate. Reaching out, then pulling back again. Hinata thought they were like two twin stars destined to orbit each other forever - always close, but never enough to touch.

Hinata swallowed, then met Komaeda’s eyes again. Komaeda looked like he was *concentrating*, almost, biting his lip and a slight furrow in his brow. Hinata thought that if he was going to say something, he should just say it already. He dug his heels into the ground, preparing himself for another argument.

And then, against all odds, Komaeda kissed him.

Komaeda’s lips were soft, and his mouth was warm, and he tasted like the cherry chapstick Hinata had seen him buy from the gas station in Sendai. It took Hinata a solid couple seconds to even register any of those details through the shock. Komaeda’s hands were on his shoulders, pulling him in closer, and he seemed to be trying to communicate something through the kiss that he couldn’t say out loud. Hinata raised a hand to Komaeda’s face to pull him in closer, kiss him back - but before they could touch, Komaeda jerked away completely.

He stumbled backwards, staring at Hinata with eyes so wide they could only be described as *terrified*. He was breathing quickly, frantically, and he was barely able to stammer, “I-I’m so

sorry, Hinata, sorry, sorry, I never should have let myself-” He bit his lip, hard. “That- that wasn’t supposed to happen, I swear, I promise it wasn’t my intention to- to-”

“You kissed me,” Hinata said dumbly, idly pressing a finger to his lips. It wasn’t what he’d wanted to say, but it was all he could think of. “Why did you kiss me?”

Komaeda looked down, refusing to meet his eyes. “Ah, isn’t the extent of my loathsomeness clear by now? There’s no way you could even *tolerate* me after this, of course. I’m sorry, but at least you finally get it, don’t you?” He was clearly spiraling into self-loathing again, his voice rambling and empty.

Hinata felt his chest tighten, his heart threatening to burst out of his ribcage. “Komaeda, *wait*, ” he said, quick and a little bit desperate. “I didn’t mean-”

“You can say anything you want, you know? Just say what you’re thinking, right? How disgusted you are that a worthless, repulsive, awful person like me would want that from you?” Komaeda’s voice was rising with each word, and he was pulling away, and his whole body was shaking. Hinata got the feeling he was on the edge of fleeing, and he couldn’t let that happen.

Carefully, slowly, he reached out to grab Komaeda’s wrists. Komaeda jolted, then went still. He didn’t stop shaking, not completely, but at least he didn’t seem ready to bolt anymore.

Hinata slid his hands down to lace his fingers between Komaeda’s, and Komaeda let out a small, desperate noise from the back of his throat. His expression had shifted from panic; now he just looked thoroughly confused, and *that* was something Hinata had the answer for.

“Nagito,” he said softly, leaning in just a little bit.

And, well - *fuck it*. Hinata was tired of trying to figure it out himself, and he was tired of fighting it. He wanted this. That was the stupid, painfully honest truth. He wanted it more than anything else in the world.

He leaned in and kissed Komaeda, only for a second, before pulling back just enough to speak. “It’s okay to want things,” he said, heat flooding his chest. “...Especially if I want them too.”

“...You do?” Komaeda asked, his voice so quiet it was almost a whisper.

Hinata nodded, the motion knocking their foreheads together. “I do.”

Komaeda bit his lip, looking Hinata up and down like he was seeing him for the first time. “...So.”

Hinata met his gaze, eyes dark and hungry. “...So.”

And with that, Komaeda practically launched himself at Hinata, knocking him back against the wall and kissing him *hard*. Hinata responded eagerly, tangling one hand in Komaeda’s hair and wrapping the other around Komaeda’s waist to pull him closer. He had to tilt his

head up just slightly to reach him - he'd never realized how much a one-inch height difference could matter.

He could feel the burning heat of Komaeda's body pressing into him, pinning him back against the cold plaster of the wall. Komaeda kissed like he had something to prove, somehow reeling Hinata in and pushing himself forwards at the same time, and his hands were still fisted in the front of Hinata's shirt, holding him tight. Hinata pulled slightly at Komaeda's hair, tilting his head further down, and Komaeda let out an honest-to-god *whimper*.

This wasn't like the kiss from earlier, hesitant and unsure. This was - *special*, Hinata decided, running his hand up Komaeda's ribcage. It was desperate and bruising and tender all at once, and it felt like Hinata's world was shifting beneath his feet, breaking apart, rearranging itself into something completely different.

He flipped them so Komaeda was the one pinned up against the wall, pressing in closer. A high-pitched, needy sound escaped Komaeda's lips as he tightened his grip on Hinata's shoulders, leaving not an inch between them. He bit Hinata's lip before following with his tongue like it was some kind of apology. Hinata choked back a moan, and he'd probably wanted this for much longer than he cared to admit, how had he not *realized*-

Komaeda pushed back, flipping their positions again, and then Hinata was falling onto the hotel bed with Komaeda landing squarely in his lap, pinning him down between his legs. Hinata's hands settled on Komaeda's hips, fingertips sliding up under his shirt.

The last time they'd been in this position was when Komaeda blew up the car, and wasn't *that* weird to think about. Hinata cracked a smile, and Komaeda looked down at him, clearly confused.

"Why are you *smiling*?" His voice came out rough and breathy, ruining any effect it might have had otherwise.

"No reason." Hinata pushed himself up on his elbows, then mock-whispered in Komaeda's ear: "Don't blow anything up right now, 'kay?"

Komaeda pulled back, scowling, before suddenly pushing Hinata flat against the bed. Hinata only had a second to let out a surprised laugh before Komaeda's mouth was back on his, kissing him with renewed fervor. He smiled into the kiss, teeth grazing Komaeda's lips, and he was about to pull back and apologize when Komaeda let out a soft, high-pitched sigh. Hinata bit him again, this time on purpose, and Komaeda kissed him harder.

At some point Komaeda's hands had slipped under his shirt, running over any spare inch of skin he could reach, like he couldn't decide where he wanted to touch first. Hinata pushed himself up and nudged Komaeda away, just for a second.

Komaeda froze above him, stricken. "I- ah- sorry, I shouldn't have-"

In one quick motion, Hinata pulled off his shirt and tossed it in the general direction of the other bed before flopping back down on the mattress. "Figured I'd make it easier for you, if

you want it so badly," he said, teasing.

Komaeda's eyes went wide, and his hands were shaking just a little bit when he ran his hands up Hinata's chest. "Wow," he said. "Hinata's really trying to seduce me." He even looked a little smug about it, but the sarcasm in his voice wasn't nearly enough to cover up how breathless he sounded.

Hinata's hands settled back on Komaeda's hips. "If I recall correctly, you're the one who kissed *me*."

"And *you're* the one who kissed me back," Komaeda said. His hands were moving quickly, and there was a devious edge to his expression. "What's next, hm? Ravishing me against the pillows?"

Hinata felt his face go red. *Was Komaeda always like this?* he thought, biting his lip. "Y'know what?" he said, voice almost breaking, trying for more confidence than he felt. "I think I like you where I've got you." He grabbed the front of Komaeda's shirt to pull him in closer, then slid his hands down to the hem, pulling it up just slightly. "Can I?"

Komaeda hesitated, his hands stilled on Hinata's waist. "You- you want to- see that?" he asked, a sudden disbelief to his voice, like he hadn't just been the one teasing Hinata.

Hinata felt color rise to his cheeks. "Yeah? Only if you want to."

Komaeda paused for a moment, shifting slightly in Hinata's lap. Hinata bit his lip, choking back what was bound to be a horribly embarrassing noise, because *wow* was that distracting.

After what must have been seconds, but felt like a lifetime, Komaeda nodded eagerly, his voice coming out breathless. "Yes, I- yes. Okay."

Hinata swallowed, then pushed his hands up, pulling off Komaeda's shirt with them. It got stuck around his shoulders, and Komaeda quickly sat back a bit to finish the job himself. He slipped off his shirt, placed it on the nightstand, then looked back down at Hinata, an embarrassed, amused smile dancing at the edge of his lips.

Hinata had caught glimpses before, in the laundromat and at the lake, but this was the first time he was allowed to really *look*. Komaeda's hair was even more messy than usual, roughed up by the shirt and Hinata's hands. The curls ended just above his shoulders, falling into his face, and Hinata's eyes dropped to the hollow of his throat, his collarbones, then down to his chest. His waist was thin, his skin was pale, and his ribs stuck out just a little bit. He was still perched over Hinata, caging him in, all long limbs and hazy green eyes.

Hinata had never been more attracted to someone in his entire life.

"*God*, you're so-" And he didn't know how to finish that sentence, but Komaeda was starting to look nervous, so he pulled him back down and kissed him again, harder.

A tiny sound of disbelief escaped Komaeda's lips before he melted into it, holding onto Hinata so tight it almost hurt. Hinata pulled him in closer, slid his hands up higher, and a

shiver went through Komaeda's whole body as he arched into the touch.

Komaeda moved down, pressing a long, hard kiss to Hinata's jaw. One of his hands was on Hinata's bicep, the other cradling his jaw, and he kept moving further down, biting and kissing whatever skin he could get his mouth on.

"*Vampire- ah,*" Hinata accused, his voice rising just a bit at the end.

Komaeda just bit him harder, and *fuck, that was definitely going to leave a mark.*

Hinata sighed, tilting his head up to give Komaeda better access. He could feel Komaeda's skin against his, warm and flushed, and he could feel Komaeda's heart beat jackhammer-fast against his chest.

He was feeling *everything*, all at once. There were fingers pulling at his hair, teeth and tongue from his neck down to his collarbone, hands fumbling on the waistband of his jeans.

Komaeda moved down from his neck, pressing one lingering kiss to Hinata's abdomen, before sliding onto the floor and positioning himself between Hinata's knees.

Hinata blinked, sitting up a bit and desperately bringing himself up to speed with what was happening. "Komaeda, wh-"

"Can I, um," Komaeda said, his hands ghosting over Hinata's hips. He was biting his lip, almost nervous about asking, like he thought Hinata might say *no*, as if he wasn't fulfilling all of Hinata's wet dreams right then and there.

Hinata looked down, letting out a long, shaky breath. "*Please.*"

Chapter End Notes

AHH MORE FANART!! BY THE WONDERFUL KB20XX:

<https://kb20xx.tumblr.com/post/654721490666848256/>

day 9

Chapter Summary

It's the last real day of summer and Hinata is starting to get desperate.

Chapter Notes

Happy Birthday Hajime Hinata! Your gift is: Misunderstandings, makeouts and vague weird feelings!

This is a chapter dedicated to the strange limbo that exists between friends and lovers, and the confusing, conflicting feelings within. Enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the early hours of the morning, it was hard to notice anything was different.

Hinata slowly blinked open his eyes, adjusting to the hazy light streaming in through the curtains. The room was warm, with only a slight cool breeze coming from the clunky air conditioner on the ceiling. The dull chirp of cicadas could be heard over the distant crash of ocean waves against the beach. Hinata felt oddly well-rested, all warm and comfortable with Komaeda tucked against his side.

Still half-asleep, his gaze drifted over to Komaeda. The other boy looked content, asleep and lying against Hinata's chest, fingertips resting lightly on his collarbone. Hinata felt his heart swell just from seeing him like this. Messy off-white hair was falling into his face. The thin sheet half-covered his bare chest. There was a dark purple hickey on the side of his neck.

And *that* was when Hinata remembered what happened last night.

Suddenly thrust into full consciousness, Hinata resisted the urge to get up, forcing himself to stay deathly still. His quickly looked between himself and Komaeda, like that would somehow make their situation make more sense. *That... actually happened. We actually...* He cut off his train of thought, his face beginning to burn. It was almost surreal. He shot one more look at Komaeda, like that would convince him it hadn't just been a particularly intense wet dream.

Really, all the evidence he needed was right there. *Komaeda looked... pretty wrecked.* Hinata buried his face in his hands, utterly embarrassed, and then he felt the body shift next to him.

Komaeda was starting to wake up, which- *of course it was just his luck to wake up right in the middle of Hinata's emotional crisis*. Almost guiltily, Hinata lifted his head from his hands and peeked over at Komaeda.

Who, of course, was staring right back at him. (His eyes were *so green*.) Komaeda had pulled the sheet slightly higher over his chest, and his face looked as flushed as Hinata's felt.

Hinata shifted, a bit uncomfortable under Komaeda's intense stare. It was like the guy wasn't even blinking.

"...Um," Hinata started. He still felt more than a little dazed, like his mind had gone completely blank. "I, um," he tried again, useless. It was like he was caught halfway between tripping over his own words and resisting the urge to slap himself.

Komaeda's wide-eyed gaze was slowly starting to disappear, small flickers of emotion passing over his face. He looked down for half a second, and when he looked back up, he was wearing an expression that seemed a bit too purposefully calm. "...Right." He carefully backed away to the edge of the bed, as far away from Hinata as possible. "Sorry. You probably wanted me to leave before you woke up, right? That's what's supposed to happen."

Hinata pushed himself up on his hands, feeling cold at the sudden loss of proximity. "...Huh?"

"Well, it's just- you've finally come to your senses, right?" Komaeda said quickly. He wasn't making eye contact. "I mean, realizing you did something so *disgusting*- you must be absolutely horrified."

Hinata blinked a couple times, struggling to understand. It seemed like Komaeda had mistaken his embarrassment for reluctance. "That's not- *what?*" he choked out.

"I understand completely," Komaeda continued. His hands were twitching. "If I'd woken up in your position, having to see me- like *that*- I would feel the same way!"

"That's not what I meant," Hinata insisted, verging on desperation. "Komaeda, this isn't-"

"I get it," Komaeda said, quieter than he'd been before. "I'll leave now. I'll stop bothering you, and-"

Hinata was running out of options, and he knew he had to think of something fast. He was tired, and his brain still wasn't running at 100% capacity, which was probably why his first reaction was to reach across the bed, pull Komaeda in, and kiss him.

It shut him up just as well as it had yesterday, which meant that it at least kind of worked.

Pulling Komaeda in closer, Hinata stroked his thumb against Komaeda's jaw, trying to calm him down. Slowly, the tension started to melt from Komaeda's body, and he relaxed into the kiss. Hinata waited a few more seconds before pulling away.

Now, though, Komaeda was only staring at him harder - mouth hanging open, frozen in place on the bed. Hinata had hoped actions might speak louder than words, but instead Komaeda

just looked... broken.

After a moment, Komaeda shuddered back to life. He quickly looked down, fidgeting with the hem of his boxers, then swallowed, shoulders slumping as he clasped his hands together in his lap. "Ah," he said, his voice flat. "You're making fun of me."

Hinata blinked, completely thrown. "...What?" he asked, eyes going wide. "How would I *possibly*," he started, dumbfounded, then stopped. He had to be careful with this, because, well, Komaeda. Shifting his voice to a gentler tone, he said, softly, "I'm not making fun of you, okay? I promise."

Komaeda's gaze snapped up to his face, suspicion clear in his expression. He was frowning, and his brow was furrowed in a small wrinkle. There was something hidden in his eyes, though. Something that almost seemed like hope. "Right. I know Hinata wouldn't..." He bit his lip in concentration, brow furrowed slightly. "I suppose all I mean is- thank you. For all of it. And that I'm not going to- to expect that this will happen again, or hold it over your head, or. Just. Sorry."

Hinata just stared at him, because it was too early in the morning to try and work out Komaeda's word puzzles. He waited for a moment, and then it finally clicked. "...I don't regret it, Komaeda," he said. Then another horrible thought dawned on him. "Do *you*?"

Immediately, Komaeda's eyes went wide. "No, no, of course not, how could you even *think* that?" He buried his face in his hands, then looked up carefully. "Please don't think that."

"...It's okay, Komaeda," Hinata said eventually, reaching out a hand to cover Komaeda's. "It's okay."

Komaeda fixed his gaze on their hands for a moment too long. His fingers felt shaky between Hinata's. Hinata squeezed his hand once, trying to be reassuring. Komaeda inhaled sharply, then looked up at Hinata from under his eyelashes. He cleared his throat softly, then asked, hesitant: "...We're still friends, right?"

Something cold crashed over Hinata. *Friends*. It was more than he ever would have hoped for a week ago, but now Hinata knew that he wanted something else, too. The word left him longing, unsure. Friends. Was that all Komaeda wanted from him? Even after last night?

Hinata swallowed, trying to keep his voice steady. "I dunno, I... I thought that maybe you felt- I mean, that you might want to..." He cut himself off when he saw Komaeda, who looked so small and unsure that Hinata was almost certain he was going to bolt if he said the wrong thing. "I mean... Of course, Komaeda. Of course we're still friends." He hoped he sounded reassuring, because in his head it mostly just seemed sad.

They sat there for a moment, not looking at each other and not talking. It was almost anticlimactic. Everything that had happened between them, all those *years* spent fighting with each other, for it to fizzle out so soon. Hinata fixed his gaze on the carpet, tracing the ugly pattern with his eyes. All in all, this just felt like a pretty shitty ending.

He took a deep breath, steeling his nerves. If something was going to happen, he realized he was going to have to do it himself. After all, Hinata had never relied on fate before - and he sure as hell wasn't about to start now.

"Would you, maybe," he started, twisting his fingers in the sheets. "Would you want to stay here for another night? I dunno, the beach looks nice, and I'm sorta tired of driving, and- I think it would be fun. If you're not bored yet, I mean. You can say no." He finally looked at Komaeda, who was staring at him like he'd grown a second head. "...Ah. Yeah, no, I get it."

And that was when he had to stop talking, because Komaeda had launched himself across the bed to kiss him. Hinata, utterly shocked and thrown off-balance, scrambled to keep them both on the mattress, grabbing Komaeda's waist to pull him onto his lap. Komaeda, however, seemed unbothered as to whether or not they ended up falling off the bed, pressing himself up against Hinata's chest like he was starving for the contact.

And if Hinata had thought for a second that he'd just been playing up last night in his imagination, well - this was pretty damning evidence to the contrary. It felt just as good as it had then, starting a now-familiar fire in his chest. He gripped Komaeda's waist tighter as Komaeda bit his lip, sliding their mouths together.

Komaeda was- insistent, almost, like he was trying to communicate something through their lips that he couldn't quite bring himself to say out loud. What that could *be*, Hinata didn't have a clue.

Hinata reluctantly pulled back, his head thumping against the pillow. "...Is this how you define *friends*, Komaeda?" he asked, breath ragged.

Komaeda went still, and his hands started trembling a little bit, but his gaze didn't move from Hinata's lips. "Are you asking me to leave?" he asked, half-nervous, half-breathless.

Hinata took a few deep breaths, the entire world shaking in the rise and fall of his chest. He didn't know what Komaeda was expecting. He didn't know what Komaeda's feelings were. But Hinata did know this: He was willing to take whatever Komaeda would give him.

"Get back here," he muttered, pulling Komaeda back down to meet him.

Komaeda was easier to deal with... *afterwards*. It was like he temporarily forgot some part of himself, whatever thing made him think he wasn't good enough. He was more affectionate, slightly dazed as he clung onto Hinata's arm all the way out to the lobby. And that was a little bit confusing, given his 'just friends' thing, but Hinata didn't mind it nearly as much as he probably should have.

It was a short walk from the hotel to the beach. Hinata stopped at the front desk to add an extra night to their room, and then they were off. Komaeda slid his grip down Hinata's arm to hold his hand.

His hands were always cold, Hinata thought. He'd used to find it a bit creepy, given that Komaeda already looked a bit like a walking corpse, and he wondered at what point he'd

started to find cold hands endearing. Hinata held his hand tighter, like it might help the other boy warm up. He didn't want Komaeda to let go.

Komaeda looked down at the sand as they walked along the beach, searching for pretty shells and dull shards of seaglass he would occasionally stop to pocket. Hinata had to catch him a few times so he wouldn't trip on his own feet, all distracted like that.

Eventually they found a place to put their stuff down. It was short distance away from the other beachgoers, half-shaded by the back of a smooth cliffside. The ocean was only a few shades darker than the bright blue sky, foamy waves crashing against the sand. Hinata has to squint his eyes slightly as he looked out across the horizon. The sun was warm against his skin. He could taste the salt in the air.

It was hard to say why, but this felt like the perfect place for summer to end.

He dipped his toes in the water to test the temperature before pulling off his shirt and tossing it back on his towel. He stretched his arms up in the air, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his skin. Taking a few hesitant steps into the water to get used to the slight chill, he turned back over his shoulder.

"You coming in or what?"

Komaeda, who oddly seemed slightly red, was standing awkwardly on his towel. "Oh! You want to go in the ocean," he said, slightly breathless. He looked down at his feet in the sand, considering. "I, um, don't know if that's such a good idea for me. It might be dangerous." He glanced back up at Hinata. "But I don't mind if you just want to see me naked."

Hinata nearly choked on his next breath, quickly turning around and taking a very deep breath before turning back. "Uh." He cleared his throat before speaking. "What about just stepping in the water? That couldn't hurt, right?"

Komaeda paused in consideration. "...I could step on a crab."

Hinata narrowed his eyes. "Well, don't."

Komaeda huffed out a surprised laugh. "Well, I guess- I seem to be having better luck than usual lately. Maybe it'll hold up."

Hinata offered out his hand, and when Komaeda took it, he gently pulled him further into the ocean. Komaeda winced slightly at the shock of the water, shuffling his feet in the waves.

"It's *cold*," he muttered.

Hinata snorted. "Baby."

Komaeda glared at him, and Hinata turned around, grinning. But just as the next wave was coming, Komaeda gave him a slight nudge on the small of his back, causing him to lose his balance and crash down into the water. He scrambled back to his feet, pushing his hair out of his eyes to see Komaeda snickering above him.

“That was really unlucky, Hinata,” he said solemnly.

Hinata flicked water back at him before diving in deeper to jump through the larger waves. Komaeda stayed further behind, where the water was barely past his waist, and he would clap whenever Hinata jumped over a particularly big wave. It was sweet, if a little embarrassing.

After a while, he finally convinced Komaeda to go out deeper. Of course, Komaeda immediately got bowled over by the largest wave yet. He popped out of the water, coughing slightly and pushing his sopping wet hair out of his face. Hinata huffed out a laugh, hauling him out of the water and dragging him back to shore.

“You sure you’re okay?” Hinata asked, watching as Komaeda finished drying himself off with his towel.

“Fine, aside from my dignity.” Komaeda paused, giving himself a slight once-over. “Not that I had much of that to begin with in the first place, of course.”

Hinata couldn’t stop himself from smiling. “Yeah, well. I’m just glad you’re still in one piece.”

Komaeda’s gaze snapped up towards him. His eyes seemed oddly shiny. “...Thank you.”

Hinata grinned, then sat down on his towel and leaned back against the smooth rock. It felt warm against his back, filling his body with sunlight. He yawned, relaxing into the feeling.

He heard the vague sound of Komaeda sitting down next to him, positioning himself in a slightly awkward cross-legged position. “Not to be rude, but you look pretty tired, Hinata.”

“Not to be rude, huh?” Hinata turned back towards him, raising his eyebrows. “...Well, I didn’t exactly, uh. Get much sleep last night.”

“Ah.” Komaeda looked down, but it didn’t quite hide the way his face had gone pink. “That’s probably my fault, isn’t it? I’m sorry.”

“...Are you actually apologizing?” Hinata asked, dumbfounded. “Because I *really* wasn’t complaining,” he said pointedly.

Komaeda stared harder at the sand. His face seemed redder than before. “S-still, I feel- I could get you coffee, or an energy drink, or-”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Hinata mumbled. “Just... stay there for a minute, okay?”

“A minute for wha-” Komaeda was cut off by Hinata’s head falling against his shoulder. “*Oh.*”

Hinata yawned again. “...This is fine, right?”

“Anything for Hinata!” Komaeda’s voice was just a touch higher than usual.

Hinata felt his eyes begin to close on their own. “...Yeah.”

This place felt like their own pocket of reality, untouched by anyone before them. Something new they'd created just for themselves. There was a part of Hinata that wanted to stay here forever. Wrap himself up in this town, in the ocean, in the way he felt right now.

"...I'm gonna move here someday," he said slowly, feeling Komaeda shift beneath him. "And I'm gonna live out by the sea."

Komaeda hummed, and Hinata could hear it against his throat. "That would be nice, Hinata," he said, clearly just humoring Hinata's tired rambling.

Hinata nodded, his cheek brushing against Komaeda's shoulder. "You should... you should move here with me."

"I... what?"

"Yeah." Hinata nodded to himself, dazed. "We could be fishermen. You'd catch a lot of fish, I just know it."

"...You think so?"

"Yeah, 'course. With your luck we'd be- we'd be fuckin' *rolling* in fish."

Komaeda snorted. "With my luck, our boat would capsize the first time we took it out."

"We could get new jobs, then," Hinata mumbled. "Lighthouse keepers. Surf instructors."

"Oh, do you know how to surf?"

"No," Hinata said thoughtfully, "but I don't know how to fish, either."

Komaeda laughed, and it was the last thing Hinata heard before he drifted off to sleep.

Hinata woke up with a crick in his neck and the horrible realization that he'd fallen asleep on Komaeda's shoulder. He vaguely remembered talking about becoming a fisherman, moving into a lighthouse, and, worst of all, asking Komaeda to *come with him, what the hell, Hinata*. It was ridiculous to ask something like that from a guy he'd hooked up with twice. The same guy who acted like he hated Hinata's guts less than a week ago.

After all, it wasn't like Komaeda wanted this to be permanent. *Friends*, Hinata reminded himself. That was what Komaeda needed, and that was what he was going to be.

"Oh!" The sudden sound of Komaeda's voice sent a pang through Hinata's chest. "I, um- I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. I was gonna wake up anyways." Hinata sat up, stretching his arms over his head before rubbing his eyes. "Hey. Was I, uh, rambling before I fell asleep?"

"Yes."

Hinata swallowed. "And you remember, uh, everything I said?"

"Yes."

"Cool," Hinata wheezed. "I'm gonna die of embarrassment now." He flopped back onto the sand.

"Hinata, don't!" Komaeda protested, frowning as he looked down at him. "It was actually... I don't know. I thought it was kind of sweet."

"It's humiliating," he groaned.

Komaeda leaned in closer. "I mean, Hinata is usually so guarded. It was just so hopeful to hear you confess your *deepest, darkest emotions*-"

Hinata felt his face burning. "Shut up."

"Hm," Komaeda said, his cheeks a handsome shade of pink. "Maybe you'll have to make me."

Hinata narrowed his eyes. "Maybe I will," he said, and he kissed him.

For half a second, he was scared Komaeda would pull away. Afraid he'd misread the situation, or had projected his own feelings onto Komaeda. It was terrifying, to make the first move like this.

Really, though, there was no reason to be scared. Komaeda responded almost immediately, pushing his hands into Hinata's hair and tugging him closer. Hinata kissed him harder, tasting the sun and salt on his lips. Komaeda's skin felt warm under his hands, and he couldn't get enough of it. Hinata felt like fireworks were going off in his chest.

Just as he moved back, a volleyball flew right past the space his head had just been. He whipped his head around to look at it, marveling at the sudden stroke of bad luck.

"Sorry!" called a girl standing near the beach volleyball nets, casting an embarrassed look back at her friends.

Hinata waved and tossed the volleyball back to her, then turned back towards Komaeda. "Holy shit, how does that even *happen*?" he snorted.

Komaeda, seemingly oblivious to Hinata's amusement, just looked utterly horrified. "Hinata! Are you okay? I knew this was a bad idea- that was so *close*-"

Hinata rolled his eyes pointedly. "Oh, yeah, getting hit in the head with a volleyball. I'm *so* scared."

Komaeda let out a small, almost relieved laugh. "...With your thick-headedness, I suppose you would be fine even if it had hit you."

Hinata elbowed him softly. "Don't push it."

They stayed to watch the sunset. Komaeda had tucked himself against Hinata's side, Hinata's arm draped over his shoulders. It was... nice, to be this close to him. Comfortable and warm. Cliche and almost romantic.

And when they got back to the hotel room, well. It was just more convenient to shower together.

Hinata finished drying off his hair, hanging the towel on a hook before returning to the room. Komaeda was wearing boxers and an oversized t-shirt, perched on the foot of his bed. He was looking down at his hand, a small, quizzical frown written across his face. Hinata sat down next to him, tilting his head curiously.

"Ah. It's almost gone," Komaeda said absent-mindedly, turning over his palm.

Hinata's gaze fell to his hand. Long, pale fingers, scattered scars, and mostly-faded ink in Hinata's own messy scrawl. "Are you talking about my name?" he asked.

Komaeda nodded. "Tragic, isn't it? The fleeting nature of temporary things."

Hinata paused. If he didn't know better, Komaeda almost seemed... *disappointed*. "You... want to keep my name on your hand?" Hinata guessed, looking at him for an answer.

Komaeda laughed awkwardly, and Hinata knew he'd gotten it right. "You know what, you're right, that was a, um, very strange request-" He cut himself off when Hinata grabbed his hand and pulled out a pen from the bedside table.

Instead of writing, though, Hinata dropped the pen into Komaeda's hand. "Then you gotta write your name on my hand, too. It's only fair."

Komaeda's eyes went a bit wide, but he nodded and uncapped the pen, looking down at Hinata's hand. Carefully, he held Hinata's hand still with his own, using the other to write on Hinata's palm. Hinata watched him fondly. Komaeda was biting his lip in concentration, fingers shaking just a bit as he drew. The pen marks tickled against his palm. After a moment, he dropped Hinata's hand, nervously meeting his gaze.

Hinata looked down at his palm. Komaeda's handwriting was much neater than his, a clean, simple mark on his hand. *Nagito. The name suited him.*

"You can wash it off, if you want. I still think it's incredibly stupid of you to associate yourself with me, but-"

Hinata snatched the pen from his hand. "My turn."

He took Komaeda's hand, tracing over the faded character of his name with fresh ink. He tried to make it neater than last time, to match Komaeda's handwriting - but if anything, it just ending up looking messier. To make up for it, he added a small, wobbly smiley face to the corner of Komaeda's palm. He wanted to apologize for it being borderline illegible, but Komaeda was already staring at his palm.

"Thank you," Komaeda said quietly, and Hinata immediately swallowed whatever he was about to say next.

They ended up ordering room service, too tired to go out to dinner. Hinata felt oddly excited, and he kept getting up to check if the food had arrived. He realized was a little embarrassing, getting excited over small things like that. And it wasn't just the room service. Maybe the trip only felt so important because his life had been so boring thus far. It couldn't have meant half as much to someone like Komaeda.

Hinata looked over at him, considering. "You're probably used to stuff like this, huh?"

Komaeda turned back towards him. "What do you mean?"

"You've already traveled all over the world, but I've never even left Japan." Hinata shrugged. "It's exciting for me, but you must think this is all just... ordinary."

Something shifted in Komaeda's expression, and Hinata could tell the other boy knew he was talking about more than just room service. "...That's why it *is* important," Komaeda said softly. "My whole life has been marked by extreme after extreme, so it's nice, to experience something as ordinary as a road trip with a... friend."

Hinata thought back to the car exploding, and the man with the knife at the gas station, and the giant Monokuma plush still sitting in the backseat of their yakuza car. "This is what you call ordinary, huh?" he asked, amusement clear in his voice.

"Well." Komaeda looked down with a wry, knowing smile. "As ordinary as it gets for me, anyways."

They found themselves on the room's balcony late at night, lit up by the golden moon above and the flickering porch-light that was about to go out. Hinata could hear the close sound of waves crashing against the beach, constant, cruising background noise that made something in his chest tighten. He'd never felt smaller than when he was at the beach at night. With the never-ending night sky above him, a dome of stars closing him in, and the ocean in front of him, glittering black water leading far past the horizon, he could forget about everything else in his life and just... exist.

Cosmic insignificance, he recalled. That was what Komaeda had called it, what felt like a lifetime ago.

It was strange. When he was back at home, back at Hope's Peak, he'd never expected that he would be able to achieve much of anything, no matter how hard he tried. But here, tonight, he thought that it couldn't possibly be all that hopeless. There had to be something better out there than the future Hope's Peak had laid out for people like him. After all, if he could win over Komaeda, there probably wasn't much he *couldn't* do.

Hinata wondered, just for a moment, if this was what hope felt like.

“One day, you’re gonna be happy,” he said, quiet. The waves were crashing in time with his voice. He glanced over at Komaeda, who was staring at him with wide, moon-bright eyes. His throat felt dry as he kept speaking. “It might not be today, and it might not be tomorrow, but- someday. I promise.”

“...That’s a nice thought,” Komaeda said eventually. He still didn’t look like he believed it, not really - but there was small, barely-there smile on his lips, as if he was actually entertaining the possibility. That was enough for now.

“Yeah,” Hinata said. “Yeah, it is.”

Rocking back on his heels and pushing himself away from the railing, Komaeda turned towards him, his expression searching. Hinata back looked at him, waiting, as Komaeda’s hand twitched slightly. Carefully, Komaeda reached out a hand and tucked his index finger around one of Hinata’s belt loops. Komaeda’s nervous gaze finally met his, his eyes wide and unsure. When he seemed to conclude Hinata wasn’t going to push him away, he tugged just a little bit on the loop, pulling Hinata closer.

When their lips met, Hinata practically melted into it, wrapping his arms around Komaeda’s waist and pulling him in close. Their bodies slotted together like puzzle pieces. Chain-link fences. Things that were made to fit together.

Then Komaeda pulled back, Hinata’s face still cradled in his hands. He was still watching him carefully, looking for any sign of resistance. He wasn’t going to find any.

Hinata was the one who pulled him back in, unable to take the distance any longer. Komaeda let out a sound so soft it was almost a whimper, relief and desperation clear in the way his body immediately fell into Hinata’s. A swell of emotion filled Hinata’s chest, and he pushed it down, down, down, squeezing his eyes shut and grabbing onto Komaeda’s hips. He shut out everything else, focusing only on the way Komaeda felt right now.

Komaeda’s lips were soft and just a little bit chapped. His hands were trembling just a little bit against Hinata’s waist.

Slowly, Hinata attempted to maneuver them backwards, pulling them both back towards the room without letting go of Komaeda. Komaeda didn’t seem to understand at first, mistaking it for Hinata pulling back. His panicked hands tightened on Hinata’s waist, instinctual and afraid.

Hinata stopped in his tracks, pulling Komaeda closer in an attempt to reassure him. Komaeda relaxed again, and in a moment, Hinata lifted him up without breaking the kiss. He’d forgotten how easy it would be to move Komaeda around like that, and the realization sent a whole new wave of arousal crashing over him.

Komaeda let out a small, soft moan, wrapping his legs tightly around Hinata's waist. Hinata held his weight easily, sliding his hands down Komaeda's thighs, keeping him close as he carried him into the room. When they got inside, he dropped Komaeda softly onto the bed, and- *oh*.

Hinata couldn't help but think that however wrong this might go in the future, at least Komaeda would always have looked at him like *that*.

Like he was magnetized to Komaeda, Hinata followed him down onto the bed, covering Komaeda's body with his own. He slotted one leg between Komaeda's and pinned down Komaeda's wrists between one hand, using the other to hold Komaeda's jaw.

"Am I too heavy?" he whispered, tangling his free hand in Komaeda's hair.

Komaeda shook his head quickly. "*Please* stay there," he said, his voice almost breaking.

Hinata swooped back down, meeting Komaeda's lips again. Komaeda pushed his whole body up into him like he was starving for further contact, wrists flexing under Hinata's hand. Hinata's skin felt lit up, burning at every point of contact between him and Komaeda. He pushed Komaeda down further into the bed, relishing the small whimper Komaeda gave in return.

They were holding onto each other tightly, like each was the only thing tethering the other down to earth. Hinata's hands tangled in Komaeda's hair. Komaeda's mouth on Hinata's neck. Hands, teeth, skin.

Hinata held on tighter. He didn't ever want to let go.

Komaeda collapsed against him afterwards, tackling him down against the soft mattress. Hinata pulled him in closer, breathing hard against his neck. They were almost cuddling, and it was very nearly on purpose.

They stayed there for a while, sleepy and comfortable, before Komaeda began to push himself away. Hinata was so tired he almost didn't notice.

"...I've overstayed my welcome again," Komaeda said, his voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. "I'll go to my own bed now. Sorry."

Slightly panicked, Hinata pushed himself up on his hands. It sent pangs through his chest to see Komaeda like this - acting like there was a time limit for how long people could want him around.

"Wait," he said, perhaps a bit too quickly. "You can just stay here. If you want."

Komaeda froze, stricken. "...I wouldn't dare to bother you any more." He bit his lip. "You've already indulged me enough for one night, and-"

With an embarrassed sigh, Hinata tugged him back down. "Let me rephrase. I want you to stay here."

Komaeda froze, then nodded, curling up into Hinata's chest. "Okay," he mumbled, his voice muffled by Hinata's skin.

Hinata hoped he was doing the right thing. He hoped he was doing what Komaeda wanted, even though he still wasn't completely sure what that was. Hinata felt caught between feelings, lost in a storm of emotion. He knew they should probably talk about it - about everything. Find out what Komaeda's feelings actually were. What it would be like when they were back at Hope's Peak. If Komaeda wanted to continue - whatever this was.

But Hinata kept his mouth shut. *Too scared of what you don't want to hear*, said a small voice in the back of his head. He kept his eyes on the ceiling, waiting and wishing and hoping. He didn't know what Komaeda wanted out of all this, or if Komaeda felt nearly as much as he did.

He should just ask for an answer. He knew that, deep down. The only way to resolve this would be to actually talk about it - but that was the part that always tripped him up. *There were some things*, Hinata thought, that would only last if they were unspoken. Talking about it would make it real. Talking about it might just ruin it.

Are you willing to risk it? he asked himself. To put it all on the line, to wear his heart on his sleeve? He'd like to believe he was brave enough. Brave enough to ask, brave enough to take the risk, brave enough to hear Komaeda's answer.

But even the thought of rejection made his breath catch. Because now that's he's had Komaeda, if only for a brief, fleeting moment in time, losing him would be all the worse. His rejection would sting all the more. Whoever said it was *better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all* had clearly never met Nagito Komaeda.

After all, life wasn't one of those shoujo manga Hinata used to steal from his older cousins. Just because they kissed didn't mean everything between them was suddenly resolved. Being stuck together didn't mean they would stay together. Half-confessions whispered in the dark didn't mean happy endings. This was real life, and Hinata had to get used to it.

Now, really, there was only one thing left to do: *Not fuck it up*.

Chapter End Notes

MORE FANART!!!! I love you guys so much, and sorry for the ridiculously long hiatus :'^) https://twitter.com/_karusketch_/status/1436422196788924422?s=20

day 10

Chapter Summary

A homecoming, a party, and one last hopeless confession.

Chapter Notes

To everyone who has gone on the journey of this story with me, thank you. For sticking around, no matter what my erratic posting schedule was, for all of the love and support you've given me in the comments, and especially for all of the incredible fanart you've made!!!! I truly don't think I could have finished this without you. So, with all of my heart, I present: the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By morning, Hinata had seriously started to question his ability to not fuck it up.

He'd woken up first, because the universe devoutly refused to let anything go right for him, and *shit*, even his internal monologue sounded like Komaeda now. Komaeda was stuck in his head, like a song he couldn't get out. His voice. His words. His face.

It was a sunk cost anyways. Once Hinata had woken up, he was too anxious to get back to sleep. He just kept looking between himself and Komaeda, still asleep next to him on the bed. Hinata tried his best to soak it in, take a picture in his memory. Memorize the details before they went away. The way the early morning sunlight caught on Komaeda's hair. The shadows his eyelashes cast on his cheeks. The soft, dreamy look on his face that he never wore when he was awake.

Hinata had to remember it now, because he knew that this might be the last time he ever got to see Komaeda looking like that.

After all, this was the last day of the trip. There was no getting around that anymore. No more desperate attempts to snatch up more time. No more possible ways to stall the inevitable.

Hinata buried his face in his hands, a physical reminder that it was weird to keep staring. Resolutely looking away, he forced himself out of bed and away from Komaeda. To distract himself, he threw on some clothes and splashed some water on his face in the bathroom before heading down to the lobby to grab coffee.

It was the typical cheap hotel set-up, a couple pots of lukewarm coffee next to a stack of paper cups. The taste wasn't what mattered, though. Hinata just needed to scrape together enough caffeine to get through the day.

And, well. While he was here, he might as well get a cup for Komaeda, too.

As he walked back to the room, Hinata cursed himself in his head. He was bringing Komaeda coffee in the morning. He had asked Komaeda to stay in his bed last night. He had never felt more desperate.

Hinata awkwardly pushed open the door to their room, attempting to keep both coffee cups balanced in his hands. He'd hoped he wouldn't be disruptive enough to wake up Komaeda so early, but it seemed that problem had already been solved for him. Komaeda was sitting on Hinata's bed, his knees tucked into his chest, arms wrapped around himself, head bowed down.

"Oh. You're already awake," Hinata said, closing the door behind him. "Good morning, then."

Komaeda's head whipped towards him, as if he was somehow surprised at Hinata's presence in the room. He blinked quickly, then looked down at the bed, clearly avoiding eye contact. "...You're still here?" His voice was oddly tentative, hesitating on every word.

"Where else would I be?" Hinata asked, confused. He didn't quite get it until he saw Komaeda 'covertly' wipe his eyes with the back of his hand, and, *oh*.

Komaeda had thought he'd left.

"Sorry," he started, carefully stepping closer to the bed. "I didn't mean for you to think-"

Komaeda looked up at him, eyes wide and a little shiny. "Don't be sorry, please, I shouldn't have assumed-"

"No, *I* shouldn't have left without saying-"

Komaeda shook his head. "Please, really, it's-"

"I got you coffee," Hinata said abruptly, holding out the cup.

"You..." Komaeda blinked, a glimpse of realization coming over his face. "You got me coffee?"

Hinata nodded. Komaeda still hadn't taken the cup. "Cream and no sugar. I hope that's okay."

"Perfect, actually," Komaeda said. He reached up to accept the cup, but he still looked like he was on edge. "...It's just. You, um, went to the lobby like *that*?"

Hinata frowned immediately. "Like what?"

Komaeda very pointedly glanced away. "You, ah. You haven't looked in a mirror today, have you?"

"...No?"

"...Maybe you should?"

A slight sense of dread in his stomach, Hinata turned around to face the mirror like a man walking towards his own execution. It took him a moment to realize what Komaeda had been talking about, but when he saw it, he understood why Komaeda had been so... scandalized.

His neck was mottled with black-and-red hickeys, from his chest all the way up to his ear. It was a stark contrast against his tan skin, a clear reminder of everything that had happened between him and Komaeda. Hinata's jaw dropped a bit at the sight. He leaned closer to the mirror and tilted up his head. Softly, he poked at one of the bruises, a slight rush of something that wasn't quite pain shooting through his body.

Behind him, Hinata heard the sheets rustle. "Sorry," Komaeda said, quiet. "That's- *ah*, that's embarrassing." The sound he made was a bit too empty to call it a laugh. "I obviously shouldn't have- I mean, I should have realized-"

Hinata turned his back to the mirror, looking back at the bed. "I have other shirts, Komaeda," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "It... won't be that hard to hide."

Komaeda looked up nervously. "But still, I mean- not only is it improper, and a complete inconvenience, but also a physical reminder that you slept with *me*."

"I dunno." Hinata idly touched his neck. "I think they're kinda cool."

Komaeda's cheeks went pink, though he still refused to look up. "But what if someone at school sees?"

Hinata shrugged. "I'll borrow concealer from Sonia, I guess." He rocked back and forth on his heels. "You... really don't want people to know, huh?" he asked, trying to keep the hurt out of his voice. He already knew the answer to that question, anyways, so it was stupid to have asked. It was like Hinata was purposefully setting himself up to get hurt. Of course Komaeda didn't want people to know. It was the same reason Komaeda wanted them to just stay friends.

"Trust me," Komaeda said, "I'm not the one who needs to be worried about people finding out."

Cryptic as always, Hinata thought joylessly. "Listen, I'm sure they'll fade by the time classes start, alright?"

Komaeda squinted at him. "...Tomorrow?"

Hinata's eyes went wide. "Shit, really?"

Komaeda offered him a small, amused smile, like he couldn't help it. Hinata's heart unwound just a bit. "*You* don't have to worry. Reserve classes aren't until later, correct?"

"...Yeah. Three more days of freedom, I guess," Hinata said lightly. "Take *that*, Main Course."

"Stop, you'll make me jealous." Komaeda rolled his eyes.

Hinata scuffed at the carpet with his shoe. "...I didn't mean to keep you on this trip for so long," he admitted. "Sorry."

"Please," Komaeda said, his voice sounding just a bit tight, "don't be."

It was still early in the morning when they left the hotel. The sky was gloomy and overcast, which felt strangely fitting. Fog crept in over the ocean, casting a dim light over the car and the road around them. It was perfect weather for the end. After all, this was the home stretch of the trip. Their last drive alone together. Maybe their last time alone, ever.

Though, Hinata thought, maybe that didn't have to be true. It almost seemed like they were both doing these strange little things to prolong the trip. He'd been driving in the slow lane for miles. Komaeda was giving him even worse directions than normal, so ridiculously incorrect that it was starting to feel intentional. They'd both suggested stopping for gas and snacks far more times than necessary.

It was like they both wanted to spend more time with each other, but neither of them was willing to admit it.

Stop projecting, he reminded himself, resisting the urge to slam his head into the steering wheel. Thinking like that would just hurt him more in the long run. Komaeda didn't want to spend more time with him. He knew that. And besides, only a maniac would give someone bad directions on purpose just to spend more time with them.

They eventually did actually have to stop for gas. Hinata pulled in next to the machine, careful not to scratch Kuzuryu's car. Who knows what that guy would do if Hinata brought it back damaged.

When the tank was full, he slid back into the driver's seat and turned on the car. Just as he was about to pull out of the spot, though, Komaeda cleared his throat. "Would you mind parking around back? I need to run into the store for a moment."

Hinata shrugged and nodded, watching as Komaeda darted out of the car towards the building. Just like Komaeda had said, he pulled into the parking lot and moved the gearshift to park.

There were no other cars around, he noticed. *Not that there would be at such an out-of-the-way gas station*. Hinata leaned back, turning up the radio and resigning himself to wait.

He heard the car door open before he saw Komaeda, and in the blink of an eye Komaeda was on his lips. He'd crawled into Hinata's lap, pushing one hand through his hair and twisting the other in the front of his shirt.

Hinata reacted on impulse, tugging Komaeda onto his lap and grabbing his waist to pull him in closer. For a moment, it was hard to tell if this was real life or some gasoline-induced hallucination. After a whole day of preparing for their inevitable split, it didn't make *sense* for Komaeda to be doing... this.

But then again, Hinata thought, since when had Komaeda ever made sense?

Komaeda was going fast and hard and a little bit desperate, crowding Hinata back against the driver's seat. His hands were cold from the energy drink he'd bought, now carelessly discarded on the passenger seat. Hinata met him with equal fervor, knotting his hands in Komaeda's hair and using the grip to pull him in. Komaeda let out a desperate, breathy sound, kissing him back harder.

Hinata had to force himself to pull away. He placed a hand against Komaeda's chest, pushing him back slightly. Komaeda immediately backed away, freezing in place.

"What are you, some kind of exhibitionist?" Hinata panted, tightly gripping the fabric of Komaeda's shirt.

Komaeda shivered, slowly looking over Hinata's expression. When he finally spoke, his voice was trembling. "...I just want you."

Hinata's body moved before his mind did. He yanked Komaeda in by his shirt, sliding their lips together. He didn't have time to hesitate. He couldn't. He didn't know how many opportunities he had left.

Twenty minutes later they were back on the road. The only sound was the hum of the radio, the only movement was Hinata's hands on the steering wheel. After all, it wasn't like half an hour in the backseat of a car had changed anything. It wasn't like that would suddenly make Komaeda like him back, or whatever.

Hinata tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Maybe he really was a masochist after all.

They were back at Hope's Peak before Hinata knew it.

The more time he spent away from the place, the less real it had felt. He'd nearly forgotten what it was like to be there. It was almost disappointing.

He and Komaeda didn't speak as he parked the car. They didn't even look at each other. If Hinata was being completely and totally honest with himself, he wasn't sure he could even look at Komaeda without saying something he'd definitely, inevitably regret.

Hinata stepped out of the car first, grabbing his backpack and closing the door. The sky was still cloudy, a warm, foggy drape over campus. The tall buildings of the academy stretched into the gray sky, shrouded in gloom around the tops. It was like the weather was reading his mind.

When he looked back, Komaeda was standing in front of him, shoulders squared like a soldier getting ready for battle. Hinata tried to think of something to say. Not a single thing came to mind.

It felt like there was some unknown heaviness weighing them both down. A giant countdown clock above their heads, ticking down the seconds until this would have to end.

“...Your collar,” Komaeda said. It was almost a whisper. “It’s- here.” He stepped closer, head tilted down. Hinata couldn’t see his face, so he watched Komaeda’s hands slide up his shirt. He unbuttoned the collar first, fingers brushing up against a bruise on Hinata’s neck. The bruise he’d left there himself. Komaeda hesitated for a moment before pushing the button back through, hiding the bruise from view.

“Thanks,” Hinata said, quiet. Komaeda’s hands were still on his collar.

“Of course.” His hands didn’t move.

“Hey, assholes. Did you finally bring back my car?”

At the sound of Kuzuryu’s voice, Komaeda jerked back, almost tripping over his own feet in his attempt to get away. “I should- I should go,” he stuttered, turning on his heel and almost running in the opposite direction.

And that was the problem with playing love on vacation, Hinata realized; *at some point, the vacation had to end.*

He cleared his throat, burying whatever emotion was in his chest, and turned around to face his friend. “Yeah, Kuzuryu, your car’s right over there,” he called. Kuzuryu was standing in front of him, arms crossed, with a small, barely-there smile on his lips. Hinata reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys, tossing them a bit too high so that Kuzuryu had to jump to reach them.

Kuzuryu scowled at him and pocketed the key. “Well, you sure kept it for long enough,” he snorted. “How long’s the trip from Hokkaido to Tokyo again?”

Hinata flipped him off. “Ask me that again the next time your car *explodes*, jerk.”

Kuzuryu flipped him off back, a wide grin spreading across his face. “Welcome home, dude.”

After chatting for a bit with Kuzuryu, Hinata realized he’d forgotten something.

It wasn’t something important. It wasn’t even something he had to do at all. And really, it was probably just a miserable excuse to see Komaeda again, though he’d never admit that to himself.

But as Hinata pulled the giant Monokuma plushie out of the car, he felt like he was accomplishing a task of Herculean levels. He dragged it all the way over to the Main Course dorms, getting some pretty strange looks from the other students. He even heard a full-on *cackle* from some pig-tailed girl in the grade below.

His key card didn't work for the Main Course dorms, either, so he had to wait for someone *else* to swipe their card so he could awkwardly follow in after them. As he slipped through the doorway, Hinata registered, just for a moment, how desperate he was being.

Hinata knew what floor 77-B was on, and he could figure out through process of elimination which room was Komaeda's. (At the very end of the hall. The only room he'd never been inside.)

He stood in front of the door, taking a moment to compose himself. Steeling his nerves, he took a deep breath, wiped his hands on his jeans, and knocked on the door.

For a few seconds, there was no response. Hinata felt a sudden flash of fear that Komaeda might not even answer.

After a moment, though, the door opened. Komaeda seemed surprised to see him there, green eyes all wide like it was the first time someone had ever knocked on his door. For all Hinata knew, it might have been.

Hinata scuffed the toe of one shoe against the linoleum floor, holding out the Monokuma plushie to cover his face. "You, uh. Forgot this."

"Oh," Komaeda said, soft. Hinata's heart did a traitorous flip in his chest. "That's... thank you," he mumbled. He took the plushie and placed it in his room, then opened his mouth like he was perhaps going to say more. Pausing for a second, he seemed to think better of it and closed his mouth before looking away.

Hinata swallowed, tapping his foot against the floor. "Uh, Kuzuryu said our friends wanna throw us a welcome-home party tonight," he said. "It's in Main Course dorm basement at eight."

Komaeda's hand tightened on the door. "I don't, um. I don't know if they'll actually want me to be there."

"It's *your* party," Hinata insisted, eyes flickering between Komaeda's hand and his face. "Please?" He resisted the urge to slap himself for sounding so pathetic.

A second passed, and then: "...I'll be there." Komaeda glanced back at his room. "I should go get ready, then. Goodbye, Hinata." He gave a slight nod before closing the door, leaving Hinata standing awkwardly in the hallway.

Hinata stayed there for a moment, just staring at the door, before he finally came to his senses. "...Bye," he mumbled to the door. The word felt just as useless as he did.

Hinata had been standing in front of the mirror for almost ten minutes by the time he realized how ridiculous it he was being.

He was uselessly messing with his hair, scouring his reflection for any imperfection, and he'd changed his shirt four different times. It was humiliating. He knew it didn't matter how good

he looked. It wasn't like Komaeda would care either way.

Hinata took one last look in the mirror, then sighed and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. At this rate, he was going to be late to his own party.

As he walked across campus to the Main Course building, a strange feeling had begun to create knots in his stomach. He was excited to see his friends again, but it was like Komaeda was always there, lurking at the back of his brain.

With a sigh, Hinata shook himself back to reality and opened the basement door.

The first thing he saw was a giant banner hanging down from the ceiling. 'Welcome Back Hinata' was written across it in large letters, with an ever-so-slightly smaller 'and Komaeda' tacked on at the end. Judging by the fancy calligraphy, it must have been made by Sonia, and looking at the satanic runes added along the edge in glitter-glue, her boyfriend must have helped.

Hanamura was sliding one last platter of snacks onto a long plastic table, clearly satisfied with his work. Ibuki had already gotten into her DJ persona, even though all she'd done was connect her phone to her speaker, and Saionji had dragged Koizumi into dancing with her near the corner of the room.

Komaeda wasn't there yet. Hinata only noticed that because he'd been looking for him. It was like an unconscious impulse, almost, to seek him out in a crowd. An impulse he knew he would have to unlearn pretty soon.

When everyone started to realize Hinata had arrived, they all rushed him at once. Despite everything else, Hinata couldn't help but grin as he looked over the crowd of his friends. He'd forgotten how much he'd missed them.

After a barrage of hugs and greetings, Hinata began to step away from the crowd - before being half-tackled by Soda in some odd attempt at a hug.

"Hinata!" Soda wailed, tightening his boa-constrictor-like grip around Hinata's shoulders. "I missed you!"

Wobbling just a bit, Hinata tried to remain upright as Soda went limp around him. He tentatively wrapped his arms around Soda, patting him a couple times on the back. "Hey, buddy."

With one last squeeze, Soda released him. Hinata took a very deep breath to recover. "Man," Soda said, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. "You haven't called us for days! I was so afraid I was never gonna see you again!"

Hinata gave him a helplessly confused look. "That seems... dramatic."

Soda's eyes quickly darted around the room, like he was looking for something. Apparently satisfied, he turned back to Hinata and muttered, loudly, "I'm just surprised you're still alive after a week with Komaeda."

“...I dunno.” Hinata shrugged, some weird feeling pressing down on his chest. “It took a bit, but I realized he’s... actually kinda cool. You’d see it if you talked to him.”

“Are you kidding?” Soda once again looked from side to side, nervous. “But what if he says something *weird*?”

Hinata narrowed his eyes. “*You* say weird things to me. All the time.”

“What? When have *I* ever said anything weird?!” Soda tossed his hands in the air. “I’m the most normal guy on the planet!”

“You tried to get me to build a robot out of cars, like, a couple days ago.”

“What’s weird about that?”

Hinata gave him his best *really?* glare, and Soda’s shoulders slumped down.

“...Well, Komaeda *did* buy me fireworks for New Year’s last year, I guess,” Soda said eventually, voice leaning towards consideration. “And he always gives me extra cola when the vending machine wigs out on him.” He paused. “I’ll definitely have to keep him away from my inventions, though.”

“That’s... probably a good idea,” Hinata said, thinking back to the car explosion. “Just - I promise he’s cool, okay?”

Soda squinted at him. “...Is that a soul bro promise?”

Hinata bit back a smile, then sighed and held out his fist. “Soul bro promise.”

Soda nodded, serious, then bumped their fists together. “Okay.”

Only a couple minutes passed before Komaeda finally arrived. The door opened slowly and only halfway, as if Komaeda was hoping to slink in unnoticed by the rest of the partygoers. He peeked his head through first, as if testing the waters, then shuffled through the doorway, awkward and nervous. He was so, so hopelessly out of his depth that it was almost comical.

It sent a pang through Hinata’s chest to watch him like that. He started towards him almost unconsciously, as if his body couldn’t stand being away from Komaeda for any longer than he already had.

“You came,” Hinata said, relief almost tangible in his voice. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

Komaeda glanced up at him slowly. “I wasn’t quite sure myself,” he said, his voice soft.

Hinata’s heart felt ready to beat out of his chest. “I’m glad you did.”

“Uh... hey, Komaeda.”

Hinata turned around to see Soda standing behind them, shuffling a bit awkwardly on his feet. *He’d... actually taken my advice to heart, huh?* Hinata thought, a swell of pride coming

over him. He gave Soda an encouraging grin, and Soda continued forwards towards Komaeda.

Surprisingly, though, Soda wasn't even the only one to approach him. Several members of their class actually come over to greet him. It wasn't anywhere near the way everyone had swarmed towards Hinata, but it was more than Hinata had expected. He considered that maybe absence really did make the heart grow fonder. More likely was that they'd noticed Hinata had bonded with him and thought, '*maybe he's not that bad after all.*' And, well- they were nearing the end of high school. Maybe it was just time for second chances.

Komaeda had backed up a bit, clearly not used to the positive attention. He was looking around nervously, unsure how to respond to his own classmates greeting him and asking about the trip.

"Tell them about the guy with the knife at the gas station," Hinata said, nudging him forwards. "You're a better storyteller than me."

Komaeda looked back at him, clearly grateful. For a moment it felt like they were back on the trip, able to communicate without even speaking.

Then Komaeda turned back to the crowd, and Hinata had to remind himself that it wasn't like that anymore.

The party had been going on for two hours, and somehow Komaeda had found a way to ignore Hinata for every minute of it. He was getting so good at it that it could have been his Ultimate talent. Whenever Hinata had approached him, or even so much as *passed by him*, Komaeda had found a reason to leave. Hinata wasn't stupid. He knew that Komaeda knew that he wasn't stupid. So why was Komaeda acting like he was?

At that moment, Komaeda was over near the food table, talking to Ibuki. Hinata guessed he was telling her about the concert, judging by the way she was bouncing on her heels and yelling out questions. Komaeda seemed a little bit intimidated by how loud she was, but extremely excited she'd come over to talk to him.

Komaeda was back with the Ultimates, Hinata reminded himself. Back where he belonged.

He tried to remind himself to stop thinking like that. He was 18, dammit. He wasn't an insecure first-year anymore. It was hard, though, when he felt so stupid just standing there. Like he was waiting for something that wasn't ever going to happen. Hinata stared down at the ink on his palm, the faded name of a boy who would no longer speak to him.

"Why d'ya got Komaeda's name written on your hand?" Owari asked, sliding in next to Hinata and slinging an arm over his shoulders.

"Uh," said Hinata, desperately searching for an excuse. "...So I won't forget it."

"Really?" Owari blinked before taking a large drink from her cup. "Man, Hinata. You're kinda dumb."

A wry, empty smile pushed at the corners of his mouth. “You don’t know the half of it.”

He closed his palm tightly and wondered if Komaeda had washed the ink from his own hand, scrubbed it off on purpose, harsh and unforgiving. Had he wanted to forget?

He should have known this is how things would end. When they were back at Hope’s Peak, when the lines that separated them had been drawn once again, he should have known exactly where Komaeda would go. So it *shouldn’t* have hurt so much, shouldn’t have made his chest feel empty, shouldn’t have shattered him into a million stupid pieces. He couldn’t believe he’d actually deluded himself into thinking Komaeda would stick around. Maybe Hinata really was as stupid as Komaeda had believed the Reserve Course to be.

But at the very least, Hinata was smart enough to put two and two together. By now, he knew he was in love with Komaeda.

And he knew one other thing with equally absolute certainty: Komaeda didn’t love him back.

With a sigh, he excused himself from Owari and stepped outside, leaning back on the wall. The slight chill of the outside air settled over him, and he knocked his head back against the brick.

Finally caving in, Hinata pulled his phone from his pocket. He’d downloaded the photos from the camera onto his phone that morning, but he hadn’t gotten a chance to look at them yet. There was a combination of photos from his phone, the camera, and Komaeda’s stupid flip-phone, all put together in one neat place.

The first was the two of them hanging onto each other in the concert venue, bright lights flashing around them. Next was Komaeda awkwardly posing in front of a giant cherry tree. Komaeda with the rocks and the demon handprint. Blurry images of maps they couldn’t figure out how to follow. Komaeda smiling in the car, the statue from Sendai in the background. The lake, bright and blue and sparkling under the sunset. Hinata, blurry and grinning with the lake right behind him. An ominous giant Monokuma in the backseat of Kuzuryu’s car. Fields of flowers under the bright seaside sun. Blurry fireworks from the festival. The two of them together at the beach, all lit up and happy.

He tried to remember what it had felt like. He had to, because he knew he wasn’t going to get to feel anything quite like that again.

Hinata sighed, shoving his phone into his pocket. Dwelling on memories was only going to make him feel worse. He began to walk aimlessly around the building, not yet ready to go back inside. The night air felt fresh, so different from the somewhat constricting feeling of the basement. Hinata kept walking, rounding a corner, and that’s when he saw her.

“...Hinata?”

“...Nanami.” He let out a sigh of relief. “What are you doing out here?”

Nanami looked up from her DS, sleepy eyes going wide. “I needed to take a break for a minute to recharge, but I was just about to go back in after this level...” She yawned. “What

about you?”

“I-” Hinata cut himself off, unsure how to explain it. “I, uh.”

Nanami looked at him carefully, and she must have seen something important, because she slowly flipped her DS closed. “Something... happened between you and Komaeda on that trip, didn’t it,” she said quietly.

“I don’t. Uh. I don’t even know what you’re talking about. At all.”

“...You know, Hinata, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear your collar buttoned all the way up,” Nanami said, casual. “It’s odd you would choose to do that tonight, isn’t it? I mean, it’s pretty hot out.”

Hinata knew he was caught. With a groan, he popped open the top couple buttons of his shirt and pulled back his collar, humiliated. The hickeys almost looked worse than they had earlier, all dark and prominent in the dim light.

Nanami’s jaw dropped, and she sputtered out a soft laugh. “*Hinata*,” she said, giggling. “That’s- really?” She snorted, overcome by another round of laughter.

“Yeah, okay, okay.” He buried his face in his hands, embarrassed, before buttoning his shirt back up. “God. Was it really that obvious?”

“If it helps, I don’t think most of the others have caught on yet.” Nanami shrugged, her hair catching around her shoulders. “But... I dunno. Komaeda’s been staring at you all night, awkwardly hanging around in the corners just to look at you. It’s not that hard to miss.”

“...That’s just kind of how Komaeda is, though. He always does that. Even before the trip,” Hinata said helplessly. Nanami narrowed her eyes at him, and he tossed his hands in the air. “What?”

“Hinata, that is not the airtight defense you think it is,” she said flatly.

Hinata groaned. “Well, what do you even want me to do about it? If you’ve been watching him, then you’ll also see that he’s *avoiding me*.”

“...Maybe you could try taking him to a Power Rangers movie,” Nanami said slowly. “And you could try to hold his hand across the chairs, but you accidentally grab Soda’s hand instead, and-”

Hinata narrowed his eyes at her. “I thought we both swore to *never* bring up our one date.”

Nanami snorted. “You forgot your wallet and I had to pay. But I was going to the arcade later, so I only had coins. Do you remember the *look* the cashier gave us?”

Hinata buried his face in his hands. “It was *first year!*”

Hiding a small laugh behind her hand, Nanami’s gaze quickly turned sympathetic. “You know, Hinata,” she started, pausing for a second. “I think he would stay, if you asked him to.”

Hinata sighed, already resigned to the truth. "...No, he wouldn't."

"You won't know until you try, right?"

He smiled sadly. "Maybe later, Nanami." With a sigh, he turned away, staring out at the campus. "We should head back inside."

Hinata spent the rest of the party trying to distract himself from Komaeda. And it was fun, and he was with his friends, it was just - there was something missing. He felt like there was a hole carved out of his chest, a void of empty and longing, and he knew exactly who had put it there. And he knew, at least for a while, that he wouldn't feel complete without Komaeda.

It was so stupid. He'd been completely independent before this trip. The problem was, he'd grown used to having Komaeda around. To his face, his voice. It was going to hurt to have to give all that up so quickly.

As it turned out, his heart was a whole lot easier to fool than he was.

It was well past midnight when the party started winding down. Hinata helped his friends clean up, stacking chairs and putting away food; he felt bad for them, knowing they would have to go to school the next morning while he would be free to sleep in. For perhaps the first time, Hinata was glad he wasn't in the Main Course. A small victory, but a victory nonetheless. He never would have thought something like that even a week ago.

After saying his goodbyes, Hinata left the building, starting his trek back to the Reserve Course dorms. The gloom from earlier had lifted, pale moonlight illuminating his path. The air was still warm, but there was a slight chill to the breeze. Summer really was over.

Hinata sighed. He wished that the Main Course and Reserve Course dorms had been built closer together.

He kept walking, footsteps echoing off the smooth stone pathway, and he was so distracted that he almost missed the only other person walking around campus this late.

With their luck, who else could it have been?

Komaeda was sitting on a wooden bench in the courtyard, all alone. He looked so small. He was hunched over, hands shoved in his pockets, pale hair drifting around his face in the slight wind.

Well, whatever. Hinata was content to just walk right past Komaeda, ignoring him completely.

But then Komaeda, who had apparently seen him, stood up, turned around, and started walking away, as if Hinata wouldn't notice - and *that* hurt even more. Hinata clenched his fist, unable to stand this any longer.

"Hey," he called after Komaeda. "Wait up for a second."

Komaeda froze in place and gestured to himself, feigning confusion.

“Yeah, you.” Hinata followed after him, finally catching up near the back of the library.

“Oh, Hinata,” Komaeda said, forcing nonchalance as if he’d just suddenly noticed him. “What a lovely evening. Unfortunately, I have to get back to my room, so-”

But Hinata wasn’t going to let him go again without an explanation. “Are you avoiding me?” he asked bluntly, cursing the hurt that seeped into his voice.

Komaeda just blinked at him owlishly. “How observant of you, Hinata!”

Hinata felt his stomach twist even harder at Komaeda’s lack of reaction. “*Why* are you avoiding me?”

“...Ah. It seems I’ve made you upset,” Komaeda said slowly.

“That’s one way to put it,” Hinata muttered. He looked down, ready to leave now that he’d gotten an answer to his question. *But*, he realized, he still had more to say. “So is this it, Komaeda? You were the one who was so scared I was going to leave, but in the end it was you. Now that we’re back at Hope’s Peak, you’re just gonna go back to acting like you’re better than me?”

“...Wait, I-”

“You’re gonna pretend like I don’t even exist?”

“No, that’s not-”

“Like the whole trip meant *nothing* to you?”

“That isn’t what I meant!” Komaeda said quickly. There was a brief flash of hurt in his eyes, and he looked so absolutely miserable that Hinata gave him half a second of pause. “*Please*. ”

Hinata swallowed down his next words, heart swelling at just the look on Komaeda’s face. “I- sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” he said, his anger beginning to fade to a quiet, almost guilty hurt. “I just meant- if you didn’t want-” and he barely stopped himself from saying *me*, “...to actually be friends... you should have just told me instead of ignoring me. It would have made it easier.” He took a step back, ducking his chin. His eyes were burning a little bit. “I’ll, uh. I’ll stop bothering you now.”

Hinata was had already started turning around when he felt the hand around his wrist. He looked back over his shoulder slowly, carefully, like if he looked too quickly it would go away.

But it didn’t. Komaeda was still there, one pale, trembling hand clutched so tight it almost hurt around Hinata’s wrist. He was looking down, like he couldn’t quite bear to meet Hinata’s eyes.

As if he had just realized that he’d done it, Komaeda dropped Hinata’s hand, flexing his own a few times before shoving it in his pocket. “I was trying to make it easy for you,” Komaeda said, quiet. “I- I thought you would have been happy about not having to deal with me all the

time. You shouldn't have to get dragged into my disastrous life just because of, um." He scuffed the pavement with his shoe awkwardly. "What happened on the trip."

Hinata swallowed over the lump in his throat. So this wasn't Komaeda being cruel to Hinata - it was Komaeda being cruel to *himself*. He sighed, exhausted. "...If I was happy about not having to deal with you, I wouldn't be so upset about you avoiding me. It felt like you were about to start calling me a worthless Reserve Course leech again, or something."

Komaeda's eyes went wide. "I wouldn't do that," he said quickly. "I- I wouldn't, okay? You have to know by know that I- I wouldn't do that again." His gaze darted between Hinata and the ground, like he wasn't sure which was more painful to look at. "It's just - well, the trip is over, right?"

"...I know that," Hinata said. "Obviously I know that." He paused, and all of the pieces suddenly came together. "...Did you really think I was just going to ignore you once we got back?" he asked carefully. "Even after everything I said?"

"Yes?" Komaeda blinked, as if Hinata had finally figured out something incredibly simple. Like it was a basic tenant of human existence. $2+2=4$, the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, and Nagito Komaeda will always be alone.

Hinata's brain hurt. "And you- what, were you trying to be the one who broke away first?"

Komaeda looked at the ground. "...I didn't want to overstay my welcome."

Hinata couldn't believe the other boy had lived his whole life like this - just waiting for the other shoe to drop. "*Komaeda*," he said quietly. "That's- no. C'mon, man, no, I wouldn't do that."

"Ah!" Komaeda's face went pink. "I didn't mean to imply anything indecent about your relationships!"

Hinata felt his face grow hot. "H-hey! That's not what I was saying. I meant I wouldn't do that to *you*, alright?"

Komaeda bit his lip and met Hinata's gaze, confusion still helplessly written across his face. "But you're under no obligation to stick around. You're completely free to continue on with your normal life, free from my unbearable presence."

"I *don't want to*, okay?" Hinata insisted. "I know you're gonna try to fight me on this, but my life's gotten a whole lot better since you became a part of it."

Komaeda blinked, several times in a row, before finding his words. "It... has?"

"Komaeda," Hinata said, honestly, "that was one of the best weeks of my life."

"...I feel the same way," said Komaeda, his voice shaking. "But I never- I just *couldn't* let myself believe you'd think that too. I mean, I... I guess I thought you were just doing me a favor."

Now it was Hinata's turn to be confused. "A... favor?"

"Yes," Komaeda agreed readily, as if he was finally back on territory he understood. "A favor. You let me indulge in something I desperately wanted, even if it was only for a few days. For that, I'll be eternally grateful."

"...I think you, uh, misunderstood something here?"

Komaeda's brow furrowed. "You told me you liked someone."

Hinata thought back a couple days, to that night in the hotel. "...Yes?"

Komaeda continued. "And then, a couple nights later, you kissed me."

"Yes?" Hinata had never been more confused. "What do you think that meant?"

"...You reached the natural conclusion that I could be an incredibly useful distraction while you worked up the nerve to confess to the person you actually love." Komaeda scuffed at the pavement with his shoe. "But luckily for you, you don't have to use a worthless piece of trash like me anymore. While the mere *thought* of being useful to you in any way fills me with hope, it's no longer necessary for you to sink so low."

Hinata had thought he was being too obvious about his feelings, but apparently he'd utterly and completely underestimated the tragic effects of Komaeda's inferiority complex. "And why would I- *do that*?"

"You knew I would say yes?" Komaeda said. "I was convenient?" At the completely blank look on Hinata's face, Komaeda continued. "...And, I mean, definitely once you figured out I'm in love with you."

Sometimes, there are things that you believe to be true so deeply that you remain convinced that you could not possibly be wrong. And then, as is human nature, you get proven wrong. And when you do, the world shifts just a little bit on its axis. And suddenly, everything makes sense.

"You're in love with me," Hinata repeated blankly. His voice was weak. His heart was in his throat. This was his world-shifting moment.

"You didn't...?" Komaeda blinked, his eyes very suddenly going wide. "I assumed you knew," he said quietly. "You knew, and we were both- ignoring it, I suppose."

"You... we...." It's hard not to trip over your words when your whole world has suddenly, instantaneously shifted. "Why?"

Komaeda offered a small, helpless smile. "You're the first person in my life who's ever taken an actual interest in me. I love you, for being willing to spend time with me, even after knowing what a hopelessly incompetent person I am. For proving me wrong. For being yourself. For dancing with me outside the restaurant, and for swimming in the lake, even though I pulled you in, and for kissing me, and for being a bad driver, and for not abandoning

me, even when I told you to. For - for everything, really. Of course I love you.” He paused, fiddling with the cuff of his sleeve. “Did you really not know?”

When Hinata finally brought himself to reply, his voice came out all strangled and scratchy. He looked up at Komaeda, pleading. “...I didn’t.”

“Oh.” Komaeda looked down. “Please don’t... think about it too much, then. And I’m sorry for burdening you with it now. Know that I would never delude myself into believing you feel the same way. It’s an honor that you would even consider using me the way you have.”

“I wasn’t using you,” Hinata said carefully. The words hurt to say. “Stop saying that, okay? That wasn’t just some distraction for me.”

“...You don’t have to say things you don’t mean just to make me feel better,” Komaeda said. There was a new, wounded quality to his voice, something so fragile it was almost bitter. “I’ve already humiliated myself enough for tonight, haven’t I? I know my place.”

“You don’t know *anything*,” Hinata snapped. “Just let me tell you-”

Komaeda's eyes were burning. “I already know what you’re going to say, Hinata. I’m aware that I’m incapable of doing anything right, but this one was obvious enough for even *me* to figure it out,” he hissed. “You’re in love with someone else, but you haven’t told them, so you were using me as a distraction. I understand, okay?”

“For someone so smart, you’re really stupid sometimes,” Hinata said. “I’m not in love with someone else.”

“But you *told* me-“

“It’s *you*, Komaeda.”

And with those words, Komaeda’s whole world seemed to fall apart. He clenched his fists and took a deep breath, like he was bracing himself for something terrible to happen. But the buildings around them didn’t begin to crumble, not a touch of lightning came down from the sky, and neither one of them dropped dead. Komaeda was just left standing there, staring wide-eyed at Hinata.

“...Hinata,” he said, “this isn’t how the world is supposed to work.” His voice was trembling. “I know how my life goes, and it isn’t like *this*. Good things don’t happen to me without something catastrophically terrible happening in return. I don’t get to be happy, I don’t get to be loved, and I don’t, under any circumstances, get what I want.”

“I’ve already told you that’s a stupid ending.” Hinata grabbed the other boy’s hands and laced their fingers together. “Komaeda,” he said quietly. “I love you.”

“...You’re going to regret this,” Komaeda said, his voice an odd mixture of fear and confusion and *hope*. “You’re going to be stuck with me, and you’ll wish you had let me talk you out of it.”

“You can’t talk me out of being in love,” Hinata shot back. “That’s not how that works.”

“I just... are you sure?” Komaeda asked quietly. “You’re sure you want this? *Me?*”

“Komaeda,” he said, “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“Ah.” Something in Komaeda’s expression shifted. His eyelids lowered, and the corners of his lips curled up. “If you’re so intent on sticking this out, Hinata - you better hope your luck starts getting better.”

“I don't need luck.” Hinata grinned. “I have you.”

Komaeda’s eyes went wide. He blinked a couple times, a strange, raw expression crossing over his face. Hinata was just about to ask him if he was okay when Komaeda leaned in and kissed him.

This was different than the other times they'd kissed. He pulled Komaeda in softly, taking his time. This was less desperate. More tender. Less rushed, because now there was the promise of *more*. It carried with it a whole new kind of intensity, something that set off every nerve in Hinata's body.

It ended the same way, though, with Komaeda pushed up against a wall.

His hands were slid up beneath Hinata's shirt, cold fingers against warm skin. Hinata kept his own hands on Komaeda's jaw, tilting the other boy's head as he pushed in further. Komaeda was kissing him like he'd been desperate for it, letting out small, soft noises whenever Hinata shifted his hands. Hinata pulled him in closer, impossibly closer, aching for the touch as if he'd never felt for anything before. This was what he'd wanted, all along. And now he knew Komaeda wanted it too.

“Um!” yelped a voice that did not belong to the guy Hinata was kissing.

In an instant, Hinata jerked away from Komaeda to stare at the source of the sound. A short boy in a Main Course uniform and a hoodie was staring at them, clearly embarrassed.

“I- I’m so sorry, I’ll just, um,” the boy stuttered before walking very quickly in the opposite direction.

“Oh, *shit*, ” muttered Hinata, mortified. “Poor Naegi.” Same shit every day, for that guy.

Komaeda looked the exact way he felt: absolutely *wrecked*. He was still leaning back against the brick wall, as if he didn’t yet trust himself to stand on his own. His hair was somehow messier than usual, his face was a handsome shade of pink, his lips were red and still slightly parted, he was breathing heavily, and his eyes were dark and blown out as he kept his intense gaze focused on Hinata. All at once, he seemed to realize where he was, and his eyes went wide.

“Hinata,” he said quickly. “I’ve debased you on campus, I never should have- of course you wouldn’t want me to do this here- I-”

“Komaeda,” Hinata said, wrapping his hands around both sides of Komaeda’s jaw to pull him in closer. “It’s fine.”

“But I-”

Hinata knocked their foreheads together. “You better not do something stupid like apologize.”

“...I wasn’t going to apologize.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, you were.”

“Yeah, I was.”

They smiled at the same time. Hinata met his eyes, unable to look away. He never thought he would get to feel like this - unashamed for wanting.

“If it’s not too much to ask,” Komaeda said quietly, slipping a finger through Hinata’s belt loop, “walk me to class tomorrow, okay?”

Hinata felt his eyes go wide with disbelief. “...In the Main Course building?”

“No, Hinata, the *other* place where my classes are.” Komaeda gave him an unimpressed look, but the patronizing effect was ruined by the small smile still written across his face.

“Okay,” Hinata nodded, grinning. “Yeah. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow it is.”

It was a promise or something more, something continuous. A sense of certainty and assurance neither of them had ever really felt before. As he turned around and began to walk back to his dorm, he knew that he didn't have to worry for a while.

And then, without warning he heard footsteps approaching behind him. He turned around just in time for Komaeda to grab his collar and pull him in for a kiss. When Komaeda pulled away, his whole face had gone pink. “Goodnight,” he whispered, then turned on his heel, grinned over his shoulder, and started walking away.

Hinata touched his hand to his lips, all his nerves lighting up. When he finally reminded himself to turn around and start walking, he couldn’t keep the stupid smile off his face.

Maybe it was okay that nothing in Hinata’s life ever went according to plan.

After all, if he’d ended up here, he must have done *something* right.

Chapter End Notes

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